

Henry David Thoreau and the Metaphysics of Imagination

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I

Life gives Power. – Chaandogya Upanishad

In a paper previously published, I had asked four questions pertaining to the creation of imagination: “What is the metaphysics of Imagination? What brings the reader into imagination? What fuels it? (...) Can Imagination judge?” (143). I have tried to answer all questions to some effect, but it has only complicated the questions further. The imagination which was the center of my cogitation was Creative Imagination or ‘Secondary Imagination’ which, in Coleridge’s words, “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate;” (Wu 525). One crucial question remains in all this—What is it that imagination dissolves and dissipates? Coleridge says it is the “Living power and prime agent of all human perception” (525), but it complexifies the question further – What is that agent, or what constitutes human perception?

I think it is high time one acknowledges that there is something quite critical that is anterior to all discussions on imagination, something that has been taken for granted and left undiscussed. If Coleridge talks of ‘Creation’, it must have been created out of a former creation, which can or cannot be rationalized, but it must certainly have existed, and still exists, as the *Chaandogya Upanishad* brilliantly puts forth, “How could that which is, come from that which is not?” (Yeats 84). What has been a reason behind the creation of substance becomes subject for rationalizing, and what can be reasoned must have been hypothesized as possibly true. Since my concern is Secondary Imagination, my concern is secondary or second-hand truth, I differentiate it from the primary which is hand to mouth truth born through first-hand experience, mostly physical. By the experience of second-hand truth, I mean the truth born through second hand experience, nestled in cogitations of the mind and thoughts on a different or the

same individuals' firsthand experience, and therefore subject to apperception. Either ways, anterior to Imagination is the experience of truth borne in first or second-hand experience. Truth, as one knows, is and can be known prior to experience, and validity of truth is relative to experience, so I delete the term validity as partially true for the time being. If truth is independent of experience, and if it can be known prior to experience, then such creative truth is an intuition. But since imagination has to be subject to 'human perception', what kind of perception is intuition that is anterior to imagination?

Intuition is a difficult term to define; it is more difficult to develop an urge to define, since it has become a natural response with ones who have experienced it. Both Eastern and Western philosophies have understood intuitions rightly, but it has still not been defined with clarity. In the Second Book of the *Katha Upanishad*, Nachiketa is made to understand the Self by Death:

As fire, though One, taking the shape of whatsoever it consumes, so the self, though One, animating all things, takes the shape of whatsoever it animates, yet stands outside. (Yeats 33)

I understand by this, that the intuition takes the shape of imagination, yet intuition is not imagination. But this locates and positions intuition, and is the beginning of a definition, not definition itself. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant defines Intuitions as "always required to verify the reality of our concepts." (Meredith ed. 221) By concepts, Kant means reason or idea, yet it does not define intuition. It is a requirement, but what is it? Berkeley, in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, makes a worthwhile and subtle distinction:

Spirits and ideas. (...) The former are active, indivisible substances: the latter inert, fleeting, dependent beings, which subsist not by themselves, but are supported by, or exist in minds of spiritual substances. (Woolhouse ed. 86)

This must be in accord with Eastern philosophy, and the Spirit may be accepted as an intuitive thing. Yet, the definition is still evasive.

However, it is not in the literature of philosophy that I have found a tentative definition. The one that evokes a response is part of detective literature, if its purpose be pedagogical at all. In Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Caroline blurts out an answer to this, "Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing they are doing so. The subconscious mind adds these little things together— and they call the result intuition." (195).

I cannot say if this is female specific, for I am not a woman. Adding to this is the possibility of intuition being very near gut feeling if one goes strictly by this definition. I am in a position to say it is not so, but the definition is a remarkable attempt. What then is intuition? In order to drive home my point, I shall invent an incident so as to illustrate what human perception intuition predominantly effects.

Imagine a man travelling through a dense forest. He has well equipped himself with both a map and the spirit of adventure; he is replete with both the feeling of enthusiasm

and ratiocination. But the forest has proven to go beyond his cartography. What he thinks is the end of the woods is only a delusion, as he finds out. It fills him with a sense of insufficiency, and both enthusiasm and logic run out of fuel. What then is to be done? There can be two ways for the person – either yield to the dark, or seek the light of civilization. The latter, if taken as prospective, means a new enthusiasm has to be generated, from which shall be generated the need for new logic. This febrile, feverish state can be roughly called the need for a new truth as opposed to inevitable death. What can be the reason for opting this and not yielding? Perhaps it is the validity of similar past experience, or the necessity of carving out a future that has not been imposed, under whatever circumstances. For both the causes, what the man has is only a powerful premonition of the truth he believes is there (and therefore the essence), and the trust he puts on the light of day, visibly fragile in the woods. All this is, to stress, a creative feeling built upon proven faith, urge for essence, and trust in the knowledge of the light of day. Thinking of all this, he sets out with his eyes on the sky, and his ear and hand on his heart.

An Intuition is an emotion; to be more precise, it is a creative emotion. It has its roots in second hand experience, and is therefore a forceful foreknowledge of the future that is subject first to feeling. Intuition is different from gut feeling because it is compulsorily based upon experience and is true, and gut feeling is not. This places before us the question of idea and its functionings. I think that Berkeley's elucidation is valid, and it should be right to quote Kant's definition of an idea: "An idea signifies a concept of reason." (Meredith ed. 76)

Idea is different from an Intuition then; an intuition is a creative feeling, called an emotion, whereas an Idea is a concept or reason. Human perception is starkly at crossroads here. Also, an idea originates from an intuition, but is very different from it. Although I have used the word 'Idea' technically here, I shall use the word ideation in a non-technical manner, since not much research has gone into its independent being. Ideation, simply speaking, is the process involving the tangible effects of reason and nothing more.

I move on to the next question—What is an imagination? Is it different from both intuition and idea? Is it a conflation of both or none? Early in the nineteenth century, Schopenhauer had hinted at a subtle distinction between idea and imagination: "Strength of imagination is not evidence of genius; even men with little or no touch of genius may have much imagination." (Payne ed. 187) For those who are familiar with the writings of Kant and Schopenhauer, genius is synonymous with idea, and idea is not the same as imagination as proven above. Is imagination an intuition then? Apparently not. At least on one occasion, Kant refers to imagination as "a powerful agent for creating" all right, but it also follows "principles which have a higher seat in reason." (Meredith 176). Thus, imagination is by no means pure intuition. What then becomes of imagination?

In a famous essay entitled "On Poetry in General", William Hazlitt, a literary philosopher, makes an important commentary on the constituents for poetry (which

here I judge a most dominant faculty in all literatures living or dead): “Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions.” (Zeitlin ed. 251) Further, he goes on to say: “The imagination and the passions are a part of man’s nature” (Zeitlin 254) Since all imaginations, however abstract, is always thought of with relation to ‘man’s nature’, and since man’s nature is nothing if not passionate, imagination can rightly be said to be passionate; and since imagination is concerned with creative passion, and by creative passion I mean emotion (intuition), imagination can rightly be said to incorporate intuition.

Imagination, as Schopenhauer says prior to making a distinction between genius and imagination, is an essential constituent of genius. Going far back from him, one finds Longinus saying, “Grandeur is particularly dangerous when left on its own, unaccompanied by knowledge, etc.” (Winterbottom 144) By grandeur I understand genius, and by genius I have proven that is a concept, an idea, or a reason as differentiated from passion. Since imagination is driven (under varied circumstances) by both idea and intuition more or less, it would be right to say that imagination is a conflation of both, and it is an intuited thought.

One question lies underpinned to all these scheme of things: what kind of intuited thought can be defined as genius, and what kind qualifies as talent? This explanation requires extract readings more than anything else, and I shall, as always, take to the highest form of all literature, Poetry. Consider this passage from Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (Book One):

‘In greene vine leaves he was right fitly clad,
For other clothes he could not wear for heat;
And on his head an yvie garland had,
From under which fast trickled downe the sweat. Etc.’ (Canto I ll. 190-94)

For someone being clad in clothes is proof of his earthliness, but here it is more out of an unease with the earth and influences upon the Earth that he wears green. It speaks of a ‘he’ who is green and evil rather than being green and peaceful. Adding to this is the camouflage of being wreathed by Earth, being incapable of throwing it all away in spite of a terrible inner malaise. This therefore speaks of a man on Earth, dressed as Earth, but unearthly beneath its garb. What is it?

Spenser calls it gluttony. I have cited this example to show how imagination disguises genius by threading it in its intricate form. To put it in technical language, intuition synthesizes ‘raw’ idea (of gluttony) into imagination, so that idea manifests imagination without screaming for itself. An assimilation of the perfect kind, to be simple. Adding to this is Spenser’s originality, of which I make no mention separately. This is what I call genius, where imagination is a perfect synthesis of the intuition and idea, maintaining an originality of both.

On the contrary, I quote a section from Hood’s well known piece on autumn:

O go and sit with her, and be o’ershaded
Under the languid downfall of her hair:
She wears a coronal of flowers faded 50
Upon her forehead, and a face of care; — (Hayward 422)

First and foremost, these lines are in concordance with Keats's lines in 'To Autumn'. The imagery is lifted almost directly from his better master, and is not a work of original emotion. Adding to this is the truth that when the poem ends, one is left with no reason or idea, original or otherwise for all these. Such kinds of poetry which carry duplicate intuition or duplicate thought in a different form so as to give an impression of originality in composition is what I call verse, and verse is an execution of talent, not predominantly genius. Talent therefore is imagination resulting from duplicate intuited thought. Thus have I shown the validity of genius and talent in terms of imagination.

Taking to the question of the origin of genius, most philosophers have defined it as being obscure and untraceable except for external details. The great German philosopher Kant has defined genius as "the innate mental aptitude through which nature gives the rule to art." (Meredith 168) Theoretically, it should mean that genius manifests talent smartly, and idea manifests imagination. But when it comes to the definition of the origin of genius, Kant is tacit: "Where an author owes a product to his genius, he does not himself know how the ideas for it have entered into his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically etc" (Meredith 169). This is a fine suggestion to evade the question. Hegel goes on to make an important deduction in his *Philosophy of Fine Art*, claiming that "Talent is specific, and genius universal capability". (Inwood ed. 31) What Hegel says of its origin will be discussed later, but among the many interesting opinions on the origin of genius, Schopenhauer's is shocking, "They (the genius) are inclined to soliloquize, and in general may exhibit several weaknesses that actually are closely akin to madness" (Payne 190). Now, this is a truth that sanity would refuse to acknowledge. David Hume, in his *Of the Rise of the Arts and Sciences*, very efficiently comments on the 'beginning of genius' as "much unknown to himself as to others; and it is only after frequent trials, attended with success, that he dares think himself equal to those undertakings, in which those who have succeeded have fixed the admiration of mankind" (Copley and Edgar ed. 75). It should rightly mean that genius is obscure and obscurity is synonymous with experiments in genius, but it is not an answer either.

What I propose to do now is to provide a possible solution to the metaphysics of genius and talent, how they originated, or why their origin has always been a question of great importance to us. Since Kant has told us that "God, freedom and immortality of the soul are the problems to whose solution (...) all our metaphysics is directed" (Meredith (Part 2), 147), I shall study its metaphysics along those lines.

What I propose as a possible solution to the question of the origin of genius and talent is a conceptualization of two phrases, *near external* and *far external*. By near external, I mean those disciplines of knowledge that can be known purely and perfectly from its existent environment. If a child is feverish, it is expected of the doctor to say that he has been out in the cold, or has taken a late bath, or is susceptible to such and such a thing; one does not expect him to say that because it is very cold in Pluto, and

because Pluto has an especial influence on Earth this week, the child could have had cold from a possible susceptibility of its influence. Now, it would be foolish of the doctor to say this, and he shall be a laughingstock; nor is it required. The lack of its requirement does not make him a genius at diagnosing either, but at least it is an alternate theory not in its right place. What I propose by *near external* is an ability to make a full, satisfactory study of thousand fold symptoms from plausible, understandable and mostly communicable public grounds. The ability of implying a *near external* to a faculty of knowledge, by virtue of not being mad (genius), must therefore be a work of talent when it comes to imagination.

I think it is fairly obvious what I shall propose next. By *far external*, I mean an influence which may be logical, but not reasonable; plausible, but not probable. It is a faculty that can be used to study metaphysics, abstractness and objects or things that have gone beyond their environment. In short, a *far external* is a method of study when near external is a failure. In the crudest terms when we, as human beings, tend to understand genius as an object of curiosity, we resort to pseudo scientific ways, like astrological sciences or else. I do not say that it is acceptable or right; what I say is that it is natural, and to quite an extent plausible without being right. It should then mean that the study of the *far external* is a suggestion for the study of genius in imagination, and I make this an understatement, open to debate that the word spirituality, a reference to the great internal energy of man, is in fact another study of the *far external* more than anything else.

There are two vulgar conclusions that can be drawn from the proposed premises: first, one should resort to far external(s) only when near external(s) is a failure. This has not by any means been my argument. These are independent faculties, subject to the whim of the technician. Genius, by an innate quality, often shows forth as greater and above talent. During such cases, one must not waste time binding oneself through evaluations of near externals when the other outpours its own share of curiosity. Second, it is a common occurrence in all literatures that the man whose genius is proven in prose has a wobbly genius in his verse, or relies on his talent in another form of expression. Hardy's poetry, though full of genius, is wobbly due to a poor manifestation of talent and flexibility. The same is true for Dickinson's and Thoreau's poetry. Rarely does someone who has proven his manifestation of genius in poetry show the same in prose. Therefore, by true imagination, or in the case of genius, one expects both an originality as well as perfect synthesis in intuition and thought, but this is the concern of the second part of my philosophical essay.

The last section of my discussion contains a relatively ignored word in the history of philosophy; it has been simultaneously called 'Soul' by Kant (Meredith 175), 'inspiration' by Hegel (Inwood 31) and 'synthetic and magical power' by Coleridge (Enright ed. 196). Except for Shelley, few have actually come close to the true description of Inspiration: "for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness" (Enright 250). Few have defined inspiration with such precision; yet it fails to describe what it truly is. I shall again attempt to know inspiration as it is.

An inspiration, as has been claimed from time immemorial, is a state of mind where all, or everything has suddenly found order, symmetry and knowledge. It is spontaneous like lightning, and may be sustained by assiduous sagacity. Now, this sense of great order is the scheme of things is a fallacy, for it cannot be sustained. This fallacy of emotion has made poets theological, scientists Cosmic and left second hand authors disheartened. Now, since inspiration is the conceiving and cultivating of a vast amount of enormous energy that throws individuals into raptures and leaves them wiser than before in a matter of half a minute, I shall not call inspiration an exact emotion, but an instantaneous celebration of an unsustainable 'feeling' that is far beyond the best human emotion. Since genius gives law or rule to art, and genius is brought into existence by inspiration, inspiration is wisdom giving. Dostoevsky had formerly claimed that "Savages love independence, wise men love order;" (Dostoevsky 78). Giving order to the world is wisdom, and the half second cosmic energy gives the creative being of mankind an instant but perfect order. Inspiration then becomes a celebration of the process of ideation, following which the idea is separated in course of time from its subsequent heavy emotion and given reasonable explanation. Inspiration might be related to the physiological process of man, for the person struck with inspiration must be twice struck by it – one presumably at the juncture of youth idealizing manhood, the other at middle age cogitating on the second youth of ripe life. I move on now to a more esoteric explanation of all these in the great Transcendentalist poet of prose, Henry David Thoreau.

II

Love is anterior to life, posterior to Death. – Emily Dickinson

I have, in the first section clarified that genius is an imagination where the intuited thought is at once original and in a state of natural synthesis as contrasted with talent that is duplicate intuited thought even if natural and synthesized in appearance. My task here is to employ these devices and prove how Henry David Thoreau has been unable to manifest his talent, or emotion in his verse poetry in spite of his idea, and his work therefore remains one of genius (of ideas) and an unmanifested talent (emotion) in his verse.

It is no secret that none of the Transcendentalists (except Whitman and Dickinson) are poets of verse; they are the poets of prose. Bradbury, although in an impure relationship with the Modernists, slips by an accurate analysis of Thoreau: "Thoreau was also a poet (...) one of considerable moral power. (Not in his verse.) But he was no more the great poet Emerson was summoning" (Bradbury 128). This however is still slack. The perfectest of such statements comes from none other than Emerson himself: "His genius was better than his talent" (Richardson Jr. 364). This line in Emerson's Thoreau is the central line of the essay, and my task here is to show how his poetry illustrates his abundance of genius and lack of talent.

Take this section from the beginning of 'The Village' from *Walden*:

After hoeing, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon, I usually bathed again in the pond, swimming across one of its coves for a stint, (...) or smoothed out

the last wrinkle which study had made, and for the afternoon was absolutely free” (Thoreau 143, my emphasis)

By ‘reading and writing’ Thoreau hints at the communication of thought, and bathing in a pond, literally and metaphorically, is the cleansing and generation of a practical emotion. Therefore, both intuition and thought are there, but is it original, or has it risen into imagination? It has, by the profound use of the word ‘free’. That which frees absolutely must have been free in its state of intuition and thought; free is equivalent to original in this case. If it is original and synthesized, then all of it must have risen to imagination. Now since it is so, this has possessed genius and talent both, talent because of the manifestation of ideas into the form of nature without allowing the idea to shout for itself.

Another example is germane here. I take this section from ‘Walking’. I personally prefer the ‘Living out of doors’ section, but I shall quote a smaller section here:

“When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall? Even some sects of philosophers have felt the necessity of importing the woods to themselves, since they did not go the wood, etc.” (Miller 433)

There is a doubleness of language here; when we walk, we naturally do not go to either unless one lives in a location complaisant to such an environment. What Thoreau means is that either ways, the act of walking in nature, at any point of time, would be thought ideal in a landscape that he describes. One ought therefore to cultivate the emotion of ideal walking even when not being able to do so. This is a creative emotion, original of its kind. I shall in all fairness call it Intuition.

Secondly, by the reference to ‘some sects of philosophers’, what Thoreau should mean is natural philosophers as opposed to academic philosophers. Since Thoreau makes this distinction on the basis of the conception of a ‘natural’ emotion, and since the idea of the philosopher is made different from the daily walker, one can sense that Thoreau is aiming at a synthesis of the emotion of walking and the idea of cogitating, or philosophizing. This synthesis being made, it can only be a work of imagination where the genius of originality in thought is manifested in the emotion or talent for walking. These two examples should suffice for the greatness of Thoreau’s prose.

I take the poem ‘Independence’ (Benet- Pearson 563) for my purpose. Thoreau begins in the second stanza, saying ‘Ye Princes, keep your realms/And circumscribed power/ Not wide as are my dreams/Not rich as in this hour.’ Understood, but what is the dream? Where is the manifestation of the dream in the poem? What Thoreau confesses to is that his thought in his dream is an original one, but where is the manifestation of the emotion that carries this idea of originality? Further, he says, “But a free soul- thank God-/ Can help itself.” This is a statement of freedom, but where is that freedom? And what kind of free soul can only help itself? This should also mean the lack of cultivating the talent for being specific about the nature of ‘genius’ in question here. The poem ends by claiming the idea without manifesting the variety of emotion: “The life that I

aspire to live/No man proposeth me;’ Suddenly, the lack of manifestation of genius starts doubting the nature of genius itself; it now only ‘aspires’, and no longer ‘is’.

I take another poem before I rest my case. In a poem titled ‘I am a Parcel of Vain Strivings Tied’, (Moore109) Thoreau complains of ‘Dangling this way and that, their links/Were made so loose and wide,/Methinks/For milder weather.’ This composition therefore must be weather specific, as he himself claims. Whatever is specific belongs to talent, and whatever is talent is not receptive of genius, and that is what the disappointment is all about. Being desirous of genius, the author is enervated by his nature of genius, and chooses not to exploit it, as he himself talks of ‘The law/By which I’m fixed.’ Law being specific, and Thoreau’s ambition not being the law makes the poem a failure as soon as it begins and ends.

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