Indic Traditions, American Literature and the Third Point of View
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One day in 1840, in Concord, Massachusetts — Concord being something like the Woodstock of its day — Henry David Thoreau borrowed from his better established and more prosperous friend Emerson a copy of a recent translation by Sir William Jones of the ancient Indic classic, *The Laws of Manu*. Both Emerson and Thoreau -- among the founding fathers of American literature — were intrigued by Indic traditions, Emerson because they seemed to support his idealist philosophy and Thoreau for more complex and more personal reasons. Both were dependent, however, on the vagaries and anomalies of translation history and cultural transmission, and the mediations of English, French and German languages for exploring them. *The Laws of Manu* is not, perhaps, where we would ideally ask a self-taught 19th century transcendentalist philosopher and Massachusetts forest-dweller to begin his trip to the orient, but it was a text of prime importance to the English colonial government of India, and thus to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, under whose auspices it was translated, and Thoreau had neither the income nor the knowledge of Sanskrit that would have enabled him to pick and choose his Indic sources, but was dependent, for the most part, on what came to his hand.

Even in this text, and even in this highly mediated form, however, Thoreau grasped fully, strongly and immediately the power and beauty of the world vision from which *The Laws of Manu* emerged and its potential to guide and deepen his own homegrown and intuitive practice of meditation on nature.. He also understood that much depended on the angle of view one brought to such visions. Tried by a New England eye, he said of this and other Indic sources, they are simply the oracles of a race already in its dotage, but held up to the sky, which is the only impartial and incorruptible ideal, they are of a piece with its depth and serenity (*Journal* , 1.172-74; cited Hodder 179.)

There followed from this discovery of Thoreau s fifteen years of intense reading and devotional study of Indic texts and traditions, primarily those of Hinduism. As Alan Hodder details in his recent and excellent study of Thoreau s religious sensibility, Thoreau not only read but copied out long passages of these texts into his notebooks and journals, texts including the Bhagavad Gita, The Visnu Purana, William Ward s translation of excerpts from the six schools of Indic philosophy, Ramohun Roy s translations of selected Upanishads, Colebrooke s Samkhya-Karika and a French translations of the Harivamsa. From time to time, and at rare intervals, I too am a yogin, wrote Thoreau, with his customary caution and humility. In 1855, when a friend gave Thoreau forty four mostly Hindu books, he carved a special driftwood case to house them.

Not until the work of T. S. Eliot in the twentieth century would Thoreau s depth of immersion in Indic traditions be matched, but neither was alone in American culture and

letters in his reverence for and attempt to understand these traditions. In spite of a romantic tendency to overlook the problems of mediation, cultural and linguistic, by which they arrived on these shores, American writers and philosophers pondered, reveled in and even at times allied themselves to the religious and spiritual texts of the East, just as they would, at a later time, with the living teachers who followed the written sources to these shores.

Thoreau s appreciation of India thus heralds an interest not simply frequent and explicit but *constitutive* of the habits of mind and culture that underlie distinctive American achievements, particularly in the fields of literature and philosophy. From Emerson and Whitman, who with Thoreau created the template for American literary and cultural life, through Royce, Santaya, and William James, who sought to give it a foundation, to Eliot and the later beats and postmoderns who twisted, and scorched and excoriated that template and that foundation into the multiple forms necessary to address an emerging global consciousness, American poets and writers wrestled with, were illumined by, and paid tribute to the great classics of India.

They also not infrequently paid a price for this tribute, a price in prestige and popularity, if not in monetary return. What have Concord and Merrimack to do with Boodh, wrote the influential critic James Russell Lowell, scoffing at *Walden*, just as at a later time the Anglophile critics of an ivy-clad culture would scoff at Alan Ginsberg s Wichita Vortex Sutra. If, however, they often found themselves at odds with a narrower religious and cultural point of view, if they felt the cold chill of that New England eye of which Thoreau so wryly spoke, the plight of these and other American poets influenced by Indic traditions only testified the more to the power of an attraction which was both intuitive and rational, both religious and aesthetic in nature.

Time and space do not allow me fully to document the claim I have just made to the constitutive role of Indic texts in American culture, nor should its documentation usurp the place of a direct and informed encounter with these figures, with Thoreau, the self-described yogin, with the univeralist Emerson, with the great master of rasa Walt Whitman, with James, friend and sponsor of Vivekananda, or with Royce, whom his colleagues used to tease by saying he was trying to write new Vedas. Above all, it should not prevent an encounter with Eliot, the arch-modernist who tried to bring the thunder and rain of the Upanishads to the dry waste land of post-war culture, and one of whose greatest poetic passages begins with the modest and yet deeply meditated words, I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant

About all of these figures there are entire books dedicated to the influence of Indic traditions on their work, many of these by scholars from the subcontinent, only a small number of which are mentioned in the bibliography. What these books cannot replace, however, is the works themselves and the particular perspective on cultural mediation that works of a specifically literary nature can bring. I hope then to begin here first by examining closely one or two moments in the work of Thoreau and Eliot and secondly by suggesting the resources these offer for a deeper consciousness of the problems as well as the potentials of the kind of cross-cultural contact they represent. (See handout.)

None of the texts I have chosen, unlike many others I could have cited, is explicit about its Indic influence or references a Sanskrit or Indic source, and yet each has a claim, I think, to being the fruit of that influence, and a testament not only to its power but to its difficulties as well. First let me point out that the lack of explicit reference in these passages should not be taken as evidence that either Eliot or Thoreau failed to acknowledge that influence elsewhere in their work, or that either had taken the course we have dubbed among ourselves the U-turn. Neither poet was at all shy about indicating his debt to India; indeed each tended to cast that debt in the teeth of his more culturally conservative Puritan, New England anglophile brethren.

Each, however, recognized that the greatest tribute they could pay to these sources was to appropriate them as deeply as possible into the fiber of their own thought and work. Thus these passages are by a paradox I hope to explore more fully in a moment, often the more profoundly Indic the more deeply they sink beneath such a distinction into the depths of their own language and sensibility. In fact, the more original they are, the closer they come to an accurate reflection of the discourse from outside that prompts them.

I will return to the theoretical and practical issues that generate this paradox in a moment. First, however, I d like to examine a little more closely the tone and texture of these passages, so that we have at least a taste of the flavor of a direct experience, the rasa created by the poetry of these two remarkable sensibilities.

Note that the central trope here, the trope of light and reflected light, raises all the problems of cultural transmission and appropriation, of real and unreal, of primary and secondary sourcing and experience that continue to absorb and vex us in the discourse we are developing together here. When and from where does light come into the soul? Thoreau was fond of asking, and the question has not lost its point today. Does it come from east or west? From inside the deep self or by inspiration or some catalyzing force without? Does it come from nature simply observed, or only from observation mediated by some cultural or conceptual matrix or lens?

Ex oriente lux, as the old saying goes; light comes from the E/east. And yet the mirror of nature, the dancing light on the waters is also a source of light, one that is as primary — and as secondary -- on the banks of the Ganges as at Walden Pond. And there is, especially for poets and writers, the mirror of art as well, itself a source, if at times occluded, of light for the soul. Even when it appears to have run dry, Eliot s pool can generate the effect of a light in its own way illusory and yet not wholly unreal, not incapable of providing a matrix for the rising lotus at its heart. For Thoreau, it is the sound of a drumbeat, or the cadences of the Vedas, that provoke insight, and not just the unmediated gaze at images in a pond. In each case, much depends on the angle of view, and in each case the insight is fleeting, for mankind cannot bear too much reality.

In his more philosophical and prosaic moments, Thoreau tended to gloss over the question of originality and mediation implicit in these observations, which is also the question of language and culture. In the passage I have cited, however, the poet s needle

is sharper than that, and he gives us an image of multiple points of view which are not so much harmonized or syncretized as further refracted into an altogether more brilliant and expansive dazzle. Each of the points of light Thoreau sees here is complete in itself, and each can only be seen fully from one perspective, and yet it is the intuition of other such points, and the vision of the multiplied light they imply, that creates the effect. If you read this entry in his journal in terms of the classic Buddhist image of moonlight reflected in water as a form at once of enlightenment and mystification, the meaning is immeasurably deepened, but in a way Thoreau would entirely have endorsed.

Rather than review the reception history of Indic thought in American culture, then, (a kind of work in any case better adapted to the format of the book than to that of the anthology or conference) I d rather dwell here on the implications of such passages, and on the issues and perspectives they raise. To so is, in may view, as necessary as it is to document influence or even to suggest analogues, and necessary especially if we are to more toward a fusion/refraction of multiple points of view worthy of the wonderful but problematic appellation global renaissance.

Let me return then to the paradox to which I have already drawn attention, the paradox that Indic influence, especially from Hinduism, may be at its best and most intense when it is most tacit, when it results in an assimilation so deep that it has no need of external attribution or warrant. What need have I of the antipodes, Thoreau sometimes liked to say; I can circle the world here in Concord. Or, with Eliot, We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.

To some extent, this paradox is built in to a religious point of view of which one of the major claims is that it can be independently verified in the experience of anyone, from any time or place. You have then the ironic situation of seekers who must be prompted from without to look within, of those, as Eliot says, who must travel East to find again the undiscovered riches of their own tradition. (To what extent the reverse is true, that easterners must travel West to find again their true orientation, I am not qualified to say, and yet to the extent that any such journey distances and detaches the seer from the seen, there must be a strange commonality here.)

Because of the frequent (though not universal) claims of independent verification and universal perspective in Indic traditions, you also have a situation in which particularities easily disappear. Hinduism becomes cosmic consciousness; Vedanta becomes Unitarian universalism; or the complex set of practices and beliefs involved in the paths of jnana or bhakti or tantric yoga become at best generalized introspection, meditation and prayer and at worst idle pastimes or dangerous new toys.

These fusions, elisions and mis-appropriations are in some sense an inevitable by-product of the very Indic wisdom they appear to elide, and they are perhaps not always to be deplored. Truth is one, paths are many, as the sages say. And yet, for any serious seeker, east or west, not only the goal of a spiritual journey, but the particular route itself is of significance. We must recognize, Eliot says, a sense in which, while all systems lead

us back to the point from which we started, yet as the experience of the trip is what we are out for, the choice of route is all important. In reality our whole view of life is at stake in the finest shred of logic that we chop.

How then are we to understand these and other paradoxes of the influence of India on American culture? Eliot s way of understanding such intersections was to see them as generating encounters between two points of view, each of which makes what he called a half-object of the other, until a third perspective is generated by their interaction. This process was, for him, neither one of assimilation of one point of view to the other, nor of some progressive dialectic in which the two would be fully reconciled in a higher and totalizing synthesis. Rather, the two points of view would be help in a kind of tension together, not for their sameness but for what he called the difference they can make to one another. For the life of a soul, Eliot wrote, does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world, but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or lesser extent) jarring and incompatible ones.

These two stages would, Eliot thought, inevitably generate a third. Eliot saw in the journey toward any new text or culture then a three stage pattern, *surrender, recovery* and last what he called *control*, a kind of dispassionate reckoning of the freight and value of the trip. In his view, this third stage was not a fusion, a syncretism or an abstract perennial philosophy, even though the traveler might indeed find himself, at the end of the journey, closer to home than he thought. The third point of view generated by cross cultural exploration was not a final or a panoptic vision, but a provisional gain, a result less of a progression than of a circumambulation.

Thus, the third point of view generated by this process, Eliot would argue, differs from our sometimes too easy and syncretistic ideas of fusion of east and west in being 1) never entirely reducible either to subjective or objective cognition; 2) always provisional; 3) always representing loss as well as gain; and 4) never totalizing, and 5) better cast in a wisdom than in a metaphysical or analytic mode.

An important point here is, I think the poignant observation, familiar to us from our own growth and thought, but often overlooked in our more sanguine public observations, that there is loss as well as gain in this shift in point of view. The third stage recapitulates but can never quite capture the prior ones, because, as Eliot pointed out, if this process is one of authentic surrender and movement into a new point of view, the self recovered at the end of this process will not be the same as the self that ventured forth. After such knowledge what forgiveness? Eliot asks with his uncanny ability to cut to the bone. These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

Knowledge in this line of poetry means many things, but one of the things it means is the kind of immersion — for good or for ill -- in an unfamiliar culture and world and the resulting loss of primal harmony and innocence that has been a part of the experience of all of us, I dare say. We may believe we have achieved a second, even a third point of view as a result of our journeys far from home, but we must also mourn for some immediacy, some flavor, even some insight that may have been lost in the translation.

Be that as it may, however, Eliot is keen, both in his poetry and his prose, to foster the ability to move among points of view without unduly privileging any one of them, an ability to bring to bear, *without fusion,* at least two very different lenses on a body of material, and to use the difference between them as a way of generating, not without dislocation and pain, a new perspective.

To put this triple vision into practice is never easy. It is an endeavor bettered pursued, Eliot and Thoreau both held, in art than in philosophy and in meditative experience than in disputation or debate. Rather than ruminate any longer, then, I d like in conclusion to generate something of what Eliot meant by a third point of view by juxtaposing a few passages from Thoreau and Eliot with a few from Abhinavagupta as described by Sunthar Visuvalingam in his paper for this conference. I hope you will be able at least to intuit, if not to master, the potential intersection, and that you will allow these perspectives to resonate against one another not because they are the same, nor yet because they are opposed, but rather for the difference they can make to one another.