Thoreau's Hallucinated Mountain

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Contents

"I do not invent in the least," Thoreau insisted about his hallucinated mountain, "but state exactly what I see. I can see its general outline as plainly now in my mind as that of Wachusett" (Harding & Bode, 1974, p. 498). Thoreau's hallucination of an enormous mountain ("in the easterly part of our town, where no high hill actually is") recurred some twenty times over the years, and was often quite vivid; he acknowledged having ascended the mountain once or twice (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 141).

An entry made in his journal two days before the hallucination and a poem about it help elucidate the mountain's latent meaning. The hallucination, in turn, casts light on the cryptic parable or allusion: "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove", as written in *Walden*.

Thoreau claimed he kept the mountain to ride instead of a horse. Such rides, in the pre-Prozac era, enabled resourceful, innovative Thoreau to use the hallucination, not only for recreation, but also therapeutically.

The Mountain Hallucinated

Baffled by his hallucination, Thoreau sought unsuccessfully to comprehend its antecedents: "Whether anything could have reminded me of it in the middle of yesterday ... I doubt" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p 141). He had repressed a curious episode that occurred two days earlier. Regarding cheerless looking, slate-colored clouds, Thoreau suddenly noticed the appearance of a low-slanting beam of sunlight, which illuminated a group of gray maples: "The intensity of the light was surprising and impressive like a halo," wrote Thoreau, "a glory in which Psychoanalytic Review, 91(5), October 2004 ☒ 2004 N.P.A.P. only the just deserved to live." In this "serene, elysian light," Thoreau recalled his unfulfilled aspirations: "At the eleventh hour, late in the year, we have visions of the life we might have lived ... It was such a light as we behold but dwell not in" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, pp. 142–143).

Although Thoreau pondered the possible relevance of the mountain's location, he dismissed its significance: "It chances, now I think of it, that it rises in my mind where lies the BuryingHill. You might go through its gate to enter the dark wood (perchance that was the grave) but that hill and its graves are so concealed and obliterated by the awful mountain that I never thought of them as underlying it" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, pp. 142–143).

As an afterthought, Thoreau wondered about a possible relationship between the cemetery and ascension: "Might not the graveyards of the just always be hills, ways by which we ascend and overlook the plain?" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 143) The reference to "graveyards of the just" brings to mind the halo of light that Thoreau saw, two days before the hallucination, in which "only the just deserved to live."

A Symbolic Tombstone

It is necessary to understand the relationship between Henry Thoreau (1817–1862) and his beloved brother, John Thoreau, Jr. (1815–1842), and the impact on Henry of John's shocking, tragic death, to interpret the mountain hallucination. Henry and John's father is portrayed as "a mousey sort of man" (Harding, 1982, p. 8). However John, Jr., was not only an attentive brother, but like a father to Henry. They went to school together, and taught at the same school after graduation. John was the most just man Henry ever encountered. When both fell in love with the same young lady, Ellen Sewall of Cotituate, Massachusetts, however, their relationship was profoundly strained. Henry deferred to the older brother, but surely must have wanted him out of the way, to have Ellen for himself.

When John contracted tetanus and died of lockjaw, sibling rivalry was conjoined with oedipal strivings, and Henry developed signs and symptoms of lockjaw himself. Doctors were afraid he, too, would die. Unlike John, who had cut himself while shaving, Henry's skin was intact, and he gradually recovered from the guilt-related facsimile illness. Although his conversion reaction subsided, Henry developed severe posttraumatic stress disorder. On anniversaries of John's death, he experienced frightful nightmares.

John, Jr., was Henry's ego ideal in life, and remained so even after death: "I do not wish to see John ever again," Henry wrote Emerson's sister-in-law, "I mean him who is dead—but that other whom only he wished to see or to be, of whom he was the imperfect representative. For we are not what we are, nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being" (Harding & Bode, 1974, p. 68).

Henry tended to deify John after his death, calling him in a poem his "eyes and ears in nature." Barzillai Frost, minister of the First Parish Church in Concord, who delivered John's eulogy, described him as "radiant with the glory of God" (Harding, 1982, p. 111). Considering these references, certain of Thoreau's perceptions about the mountain's summit are less perplexing. On it, he said he felt as if he "trod with awe the face of a god turned up, unwittingly but helplessly yielding to the laws of gravity" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 142). Henry witnessed, he said, "a hard-featured god reposing, whose breath hangs about his forehead" (Harding & Bode, 1974, p. 498).

It seemed that the mountain "ever smoke[d] like an altar with its sacrifice" (Harding & Bode, 1974, p. 498). One may regard the mountain, perched atop John's grave in Henry's mind, a symbolic tombstone. If Henry had wanted John out of the way to have Ellen for himself, John could be considered the sacrificial victim.

Ever resourceful, Henry transformed the hallucination into a poem (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 144):

A Mount Ascends

> Forever in my dream and in my morning thought, Eastward a mount ascends;

But when in the sunbeam its hard outline is sought, It all dissolves and ends.

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Perhaps I have no shoes fit for the lofty soil Where my thoughts graze,

Nor properly spun clues, nor well-strained mid-day oil, Or must I mend my ways?

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It is a promised land which I have not yet earned. I have not made beginning

With consecrated hand, nor have I ever learned To lay the underpinning.

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It is a spiral path within the pilgrim's soul Leads to the mountain's brow;
Commencing at his hearth he climbs up to this goal He knows not when nor how

Although not one of Thoreau's finest, the poem does cast light on the psychogenesis of a hallucination. Its dominant theme, inadequacy, bespeaks his need for an ego ideal, and the importance of the hallucination in providing it. With "no shoes fit for the lofty soil," "nor properly spun clues," and no "wellstrained mid-day oil," the poet had "not made beginning," and had to "mend [his] ways."

The shortcomings revealed bring to mind the glorious halo of light "in which only the just deserved to live."

On the hallucinated mountain, which "concealed and obliterated" John's grave, Henry could distance himself from fratricidal guilt. A just man, conjoined spiritually with John, he did not have to die, as he almost did, two weeks after John's death, from facsimile lockjaw.

The Hallucination as Therapeutic

Hallucinations are generally regarded by Western mental health professionals as ominous signs, symptomatic of psychosis. Many so-called "normal" persons, however, experience a transitional state of drowsiness, immediately prior to, or upon awakening from sleep, in which hallucinations may occur. Those preceding sleep are called hypnagogic, and those following it, hypnopompic. Thoreau experienced both.

Thoreau, drifting along in his skiff on a moonlit stream, perceived an endless procession of porticoes and columns, cornices and fac¸ades, verandas and churches: "I did not merely fancy them," Thoreau makes clear, "but in my drowsy state such was the

illusion." He concluded that "our minds anywhere, when left to themselves, are always thus busily drawing conclusions from false premises" (Moldenhaver, 1972, p. 203).

The enormous mountain was a recurrent, visual, hypnopompic hallucination: "There are some things which I cannot at once tell," he wrote (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 141), "whether I have dreamed them or they are real. This is especially the case in the early morning hours, when there is a gradual transition from dreams to waking thoughts." The hallucinatory nature of "such altered states of consciousness accounts, in part, for his erroneous self-diagnosis: Insanity" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 211).

Although the pleasure of ascending the imagined mountain was mixed with awe and concerns about his sanity, Thoreau was explicit that, resulting from the hallucination, "my thoughts are purified and sublimed ... as if I had been translated" (Torrey & Allen, 1962, vol. 10, p. 144). "I keep this mountain," he told a friend, "to ride instead of a horse" (Harding & Bode, 1974, p. 498).

An Enigmatic Parable

Another reference to a horse, in *Walden*, comes to mind while pondering the one grazing, in Thoreau's psyche, beside the imaginary mountain. It is found (or rather lost) in a not readily comprehensible parable:

> I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse and a turtledove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travelers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves. (Owens, 1981, pp. 18–19)

Some critics ascribe specific referents to these symbols. T.M. Raysor (Harding, 1982, p. 327), considers that Ellen Sewall's younger brother (the "gentle boy" whose virtues Thoreau extolled in the homoerotic paean, "Lately, Alas, I Knew a Gentle Boy," (Bode, 1970, pp. 54–55), is symbolized by the hound; Ellen, herself, by the turtledove; and John, by the bay horse.

Since John, Jr., meant the world to Henry, hound, horse, and dove may represent important facets of the dead brother's psyche, lost to Henry in death.

Thoreau used the hallucinations to reunite with John, his ego ideal, during times of despair. At such times he felt "just," that he had the right to live (despite his fratricidal guilt), and that he no longer "beheld but dwelled not in" the halo of glorious light.

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