

THE “*DANDA*,” THE STACK/STOCK/STICK OF THE ARTIST OF *KOUROO*



The Staff of Perfection

An artist of long ago
Lived in the city of Kouroo.
A perfect work he sought to make
Being free of flaw or mistake.

For years no wood could he find
To make the staff of just the right kind.
In time his friends grew old and died,
But he in youth did abide.

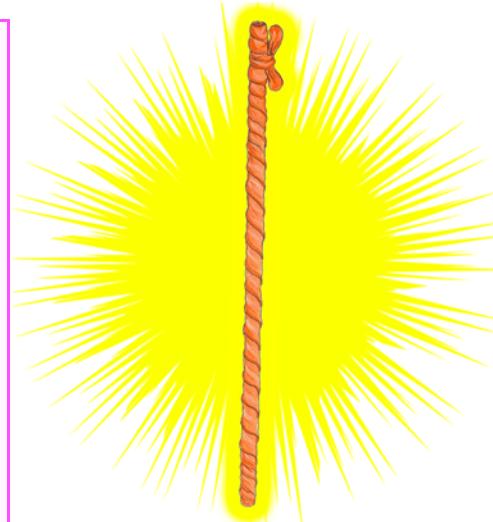
For time kept out of his way
In his search for the wood each day.
Before he found a stock to do
In ruin was the city Kouroo.

He shaped it on and on
While dynasties had come and gone.
Kalpa no longer the polestar
When he smoothed the staff of mar.

On the ferrule and the head
The most precious jewels he did imbed.
When the finishing stroke was done
His creation was the fairest one.

The material and his art
Were both pure in every part.
Wonderful was the staff to see.
How else could the result be?

— Walter Westfall



1794

Posthumous publication of [Sir William Jones](#)'s translation of INSTITUTES OF *HINDU LAW*; OR THE ORDINANCES OF M E N U, *ACCORDING TO THE GLOSS OF CULLÚCA [BHATTA]*, COMPRISING THE INDIAN SYSTEM OF DUTIES RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL: VERBALLY TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL SANSKRIT. PRINTED BY THE ORDER OF GOVERNMENT. Calcutta. M DCC XCIV.



(It had been an obvious choice, when [Sir William Jones](#) had chosen to translate 1st into English the *MANAVA DHARMASATRA* (which is what THE ORDINANCES OF MENU are known as in [India](#)), rather than some other of the Dharmasatras — for there is no question that this one was more highly regarded in India than any other. Not only had Brhaspati, one of Manu's successors, declared in about the 5th Century CE that any text that contained something that would contradict anything in Manu would be a text of no validity, but also, a total of nine commentaries had been written on this Dharmasatra and were still extant at this point at which the administration of law was being taken over by the British colonial authorities, which is more than on any other Dharmasatra.)



Because we wanted to evaluate this as a possible source for [Henry Thoreau](#)'s "Artist of Kouroo" parable in WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS, I have made a careful inspection of a copy of the 1st edition, in the Houghton Rare Book Room of Harvard University (the volume had been signed by [James Elliot Cabot](#) in 1844 and had been donated to Harvard during January 1904, and still sports the Cabot bookplate figuring three codfish, heads pointing upward).

Page v: "We are loft in an inextricable labyrinth of imaginary aftronomical cycles, *Yugas*, *Maháyugas*, *Calpas*, and *Menwantaras*, in attempting to calculate the time, when the firft MENU, according to the *Bráhmens*, governed this world, and became the progenitor of mankind, who from him are called *mánaváh*; nor can we, fo clouded are the old hiftory and chronology of *India* with fables and allegories, afcertain the precife age, when the work, now prefenteted to the publick, was actually compofed; abut we are in poffeffion of fome evidence, partly extrinfick and partly internal, that it is really one of the olfeft compofitions exifting."

I will excerpt the relevant passage, which is from page 201. This is the passage that would be quoted by [Waldo Emerson](#) in his Bowdoin Prize essay "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy" as he completed his senior year at [Harvard College](#) in 1821. In this essay Emerson would draw upon Southey's CURSE OF KEHAMA at a point at which Southey was quoting Sir William's INSTITUTES (this is JMN I 259 in Emerson's journals), in the process of contrasting the ancient wisdom of the Indians with the shallowness of medieval Catholicism: "The Hindoo had gone far beyond them in his moral estimates. 'If thou be not,' says the law-giver Menu, 'at variance, by speaking falsely, with Yama, the subduer of all, with Vaivaswata, the punifher, with that great divinity who dwells in the breast, go not on a pilgrimage to the river Ganga, nor to the plains of Curu, for thou has no need of expiation.'" Here is the passage as it actually appears in this original 1794 edition of INSTITUTES OF *HINDU LAW*:

92 " If thou beeft not at variance, by fpeaking falfeſly, with YAMA, or th fubduer of all, with VAIVASWATA, or the punifher, with that great divinity, who dwells in thy breaſt, go not on a pilgrimage to the river Gangà, nor to the plains of CURU, for



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thou haft no need of expiation.

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(I wasn't able to figure out what the quotation mark at the start was intended to signify.) As we can see, this would be an unlikely source for [Henry Thoreau](#)'s parable of the "Artist of Kouroo," since it is spelled "Curu" rather than "Kuru" or "Kouroo," since there is no city and no artist, since nobody goes for a walk, since there is no stick or stock, and since there is no parable. (Although a staff is indeed mentioned at one point in this volume of [Indian](#) law, the only variable in regard to this staff is length: there must be a slightly different, but definitive, length for each of the castes of Hindu society. No carving as mentioned by Thoreau in WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS would have been possible, since the text mandates that all the bark be left on such a staff.)

[A WEEK:](#) The wisest conservatism is that of the Hindoos. "Immemorial custom is transcendent law," says Menu. That is, it was the custom of the gods before men used it. The fault of our New England custom is that it is memorial. What is morality but immemorial custom? Conscience is the chief of conservatives.

[A WEEK:](#) One of the most attractive of those ancient books that I have met with is the Laws of Menu. According to Sir William Jones, "Vyasa, the son of Parasara, has decided that the Veda, with its Angas, or the six compositions deduced from it, the revealed system of medicine, the Puranas or sacred histories, and the code of Menu, were four works of supreme authority, which ought never to be shaken by arguments merely human."

[A WEEK:](#) The last is believed by the Hindoos "to have been promulgated [??] in the beginning of time, by Menu, son or grandson of Brahma," and "first of created beings"....

[A WEEK:](#) Brahma is said to have "taught his laws to Menu in a hundred thousand verses, which Menu explained to the primitive world in the very words of the book now translated." Others affirm that they have undergone successive abridgments for the convenience of mortals, "while the gods of the lower heaven and the band of celestial musicians are engaged in studying the primary code."



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A WEEK: "A number of glosses or comments on Menu were composed by the Munis, or old philosophers, whose treatises, together with that before us, constitute the Dherma Sastra, in a collective sense, or Body of Law." Culluca Bhatta was one of the more modern of these.

A WEEK: "When that power awakes, then has this world its full expansion; but when he slumbers with a tranquil spirit, then the whole system fades away."

A WEEK: Nor will we disturb the antiquity of this Scripture; "From fire, from air, and from the sun," it was "milked out." One might as well investigate the chronology of light and heat. Let the sun shine.



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A WEEK: Menu understood this matter best, when he said, "Those best know the divisions of days and nights who understand that the day of Brahma, which endures to the end of a thousand such ages, [infinite ages, nevertheless, according to mortal reckoning,] gives rise to virtuous exertions; and that his night endures as long as his day." Indeed, the Mussulman and Tartar dynasties are beyond all dating. Methinks I have lived under them myself. In every man's brain is the Sanscrit. The Vedas and their Angas are not so ancient as serene contemplation. Why will we be imposed on by antiquity? Is the babe young? When I behold it, it seems more venerable than the oldest man; it is more ancient than Nestor or the Sibyls, and bears the wrinkles of father Saturn himself. And do we live but in the present? How broad a line is that? I sit now on a stump whose rings number centuries of growth. If I look around I see that the soil is composed of the remains of just such stumps, ancestors to this. The earth is covered with mould. I thrust this stick many aeons deep into its surface, and with my heel make a deeper furrow than the elements have ploughed here for a thousand years. If I listen, I hear the peep of frogs which is older than the slime of Egypt, and the distant drumming of a partridge on a log, as if it were the pulse-beat of the summer air. I raise my fairest and freshest flowers in the old mould. Why, what we would fain call new is not skin deep; the earth is not yet stained by it. It is not the fertile ground which we walk on, but the leaves which flutter over our heads. The newest is but the oldest made visible to our senses. When we dig up the soil from a thousand feet below the surface, we call it new, and the plants which spring from it; and when our vision pierces deeper into space, and detects a remoter star, we call that new also. The place where we sit is called Hudson, — once it was Nottingham, — once —

We should read history as little critically as we consider the landscape, and be more interested by the atmospheric tints and various lights and shades which the intervening spaces create, than by its groundwork and composition. It is the morning now turned evening and seen in the west, — the same sun, but a new light and atmosphere. Its beauty is like the sunset; not a fresco painting on a wall, flat and bounded, but atmospheric and roving or free. In reality, history fluctuates as the face of the landscape from morning to evening. What is of moment is its hue and color. Time hides no treasures; we want not its **then**, but its **now**. We do not complain that the mountains in the horizon are blue and indistinct; they are the more like the heavens.

EGYPT

DISTANT DRUMMING



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J. Cockburn Thompson, in the preface of his translation of THE *BHAGAVAD-GITA*, OR A DISCOURSE BETWEEN *KRISHNA* AND *ARJUNA* ON DIVINE MATTERS, A *SANSKRIT* PHILOSOPHICAL POEM, TRANSLATED, WITH COPIOUS NOTES, AN INTRODUCTION ON *SANSKRIT* PHILOSOPHY, AND OTHER MATTERS in 1855, offered that:

The Mahabharata, as all students of Sanskrit well know, is the great epic of India, which, from its popularity and extent, would seem to correspond with the Iliad among the Greeks. The theme of the whole work is a certain war which was carried on between two branches of one tribe, the descendants of Kuru, for the sovereignty of Hastinapura, commonly supposed to be the same as the modern Delhi. The elder branch is called by the general name of the whole tribe, Kurus; the younger goes by the patronymic from Pandu, the father of its five principal leaders. This war between the Kurus and Pandavas occupies about twenty thousand slokas, or a quarter of the whole work, as we now possess it.... In order to understand the allusions there made [in the Bhagavad-Gita], a knowledge is requisite of the preceding history of the tribe, which will now be given as follows.

Of the name Kuru we know but little, but that little is sufficient to prove that it is one of great importance. We have no means of deriving it from any Sanskrit root, nor has it, like too many of the old Indian names, the appearance of being explanatory of the peculiarities of the person or persons whom it designates. It is, therefore, in all probability, a name of considerable antiquity, brought by the Aryan race from their first seat in Central Asia. Its use in Sanskrit is fourfold. It is the name of the northern quarter, or Dwipa, of the world, and is described as lying between the most northern range of snowy mountains and the polar sea. It is, further, the name of the most northern of the nine Varshas of the known world. Among the long genealogies of the tribe itself, it is found as the name of an ancient king, to whom the foundation of the tribe is attributed. Lastly, it designates an Aryan tribe of sufficient importance to disturb the whole of northern India with its factions, and to make its battles the theme of the longest epic of olden time.

Viewing these facts together, we should be inclined to draw the conclusion that the name was originally that of a race inhabiting Central Asia beyond the Himalaya, who emigrated with other races into the northwest of the Peninsula, and with them formed the great people who styled themselves unitedly Arya, or the Noble, to distinguish them from the aborigines whom they subdued, and on whose territories they eventually settled.... At the time when the plot of the Mahabharata was enacted, this tribe was situated in the plain of the Doab, and their particular region, lying between the Junma and Sursooty rivers, was called Kurukshetra, or the plain of the Kurus. The capital of this country was Hastinapura, and here reigned, at a period of which we cannot give the exact date, a king named Vichitravirya. He was the son of Santanu and Satyavati; and Bhishma and Krishna



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Dwaipayana, the Vyasa, were his half-brothers; the former being his father's, the latter his mother's son. He married two sisters -Amba and Ambalika- but dying shortly after his marriage ... he left no progeny; and his half-brother, the Vyasa, instigated by divine command, married his widows and begot two sons, Dhritarashtra and Pandu. The former had one hundred sons, the eldest of whom was Duryodhana. The latter married firstly Pritha, or Kunti, the daughter of Sura, and secondly Madri. The children of these wives were the five Pandava princes; but as their mortal father had been cursed by a deer while hunting to be childless all his life, these children were mystically begotten by different deities. Thus Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna, were the sons of Pritha by Dharma, Vayu, and Indra, respectively. Nakula was the son of Madri by Nasatya the elder, and Sahadeva, by Dasra the younger of the twin Asvinau, the physicians of the gods. This story would seem to be a fiction, invented to give a divine origin to the five heroes of the poem: but, however this may be, Duryodhana and his brothers are the leaders of the Kuru, or elder branch of the tribe; and the five Pandava princes those of the Pandava or younger branch.

Dhritarashtra was blind, but although thus incapacitated for governing, he retained the throne, while his son Duryodhana really directed the affairs of the State.... he prevailed on his father to banish his cousins, the Pandava princes, from the country. After long wanderings and varied hardships, these princes collected their friends around them, formed by the help of many neighboring kings a vast army, and prepared to attack their unjust oppressor, who had, in like manner, assembled his forces.

The hostile armies meet on the plain of the Kurus. Bhishma, the half-brother of Vichitravirya, being the oldest warrior among them, has the command of the Kuru faction; Bhima, the second son of Pandu, noted for his strength and prowess, is the general of the other party [Arjuna's]. The scene of our poem now opens, and remains throughout the same - the field of battle. In order to introduce to the reader the names of the principal chieftains in each army, Duryodhana is made to approach Drona, his military preceptor, and name them one by one. The challenge is then suddenly given by Bhishma, the Kuru general, by blowing his conch; and he is seconded by all his followers. It is returned by Arjuna, who is in the same chariot with the god Krishna, who, in compassion for the persecution he suffered, had become his intimate friend, and was now acting the part of a charioteer to him. He is followed by all the generals of the Pandavas. The fight then begins with a volley of arrows from both sides; but when Arjuna perceives it, he begs Krishna to draw up the chariot in the space between the two armies, while he examines the lines of the enemy. The god does so, and points out in those lines the numerous relatives of his friend. Arjuna is horror-struck at the idea of committing fratricide by slaying his near relations, and throws down his bow and arrow, declaring that he would rather be killed without defending himself, than fight against them.



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Krishna replies with the arguments which form the didactic and philosophical doctrines of the work, and endeavors to persuade him that he is mistaken in forming such a resolution. Arjuna is eventually overruled. The fight goes on, and the Pandavas defeat their opponents....

WALDEN: There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life. He proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it should not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and rejected stick after stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for they grew old in their works and died, but he grew not older by a moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a stock in all respects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and he sat on one of its mounds to peel the stick. Before he had given it the proper shape the dynasty of the Candahars was at an end, and with the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last of that race in the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoke and slumbered many times. But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

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Dr. Bradley P. Dean has pointed out that:

"Kuru" (more specifically, "Kurus") appears in the Sankhya



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Karika within two particular contexts, and because Thoreau demonstrably studied this text very carefully and therefore almost certainly picked up certain associations with the word as a geographical locale (it was basically a Hindu paradise represented variously as of this world or, as in the Sankhya Karika, other-worldly). Jeffrey S. Cramer has "Kouroo" pointing solely and simply to a legendary hero named Kuru or Curu or Kooroo; I suggest Thoreau regarded "Kouroo" as a very particular kind of location, not as a person. Did the artist of the parable carve his staff in a city named Kouroo that straddles the eternal and the temporal, or did he carve his staff in a city famous for having been the birthplace or home of a legendary hero named Kouroo? The fact that Thoreau was familiar with "the northern Kurus" as a Hindu paradise, sometimes terrestrial and other times (as in the Sankhya Karika) other-worldly, is a significant bit of information, I think.

(For the terrestrial "northern Kurus" being, as it were, terrestrially paradisiacal, see several uses in the Mahabharata, perhaps most notably this one from Book 6, Section 7: "Dhritarashtra said, 'Tell me, O Sanjaya, thou of great intelligence, of the regions to the north and the east side of Meru, as also of the mountains of Malyavat, in detail.' Sanjaya said, 'On the south of the Nila mountain and the northern side of Meru are the sacred Northern Kurus, O king, which are the residence of the Siddhas. The trees there bear sweet fruits, and are always covered with fruits and flowers. All the flowers are fragrant, and the fruits of excellent taste. Some of the trees, again, O king, yield fruits according to will [according to the will of the pickers?]. There are again some other trees, O king, that are called milk-yielding. These always yield milk and the six different kinds of food of the taste of Amrita itself. Those trees also yield cloths and in their fruits are ornaments. The entire land abounds with fine golden sands. A portion of the region there, extremely delightful, is seen to be possessed of the radiance of the ruby or diamond, or of the lapis lazuli or other jewels and gems. All the seasons there are agreeable and nowhere does the land become miry, O king. The tanks are charming, delicious, and full of crystal water. The men born there have dropped from the world of the celestials. All are of pure birth and all are extremely handsome in appearance. There twins are born and the women resemble Apsaras in beauty. They drink the milk, sweet as Amrita, of the milk-yielding trees. And the twins born there grow up equally, both possessed of equal beauty, both endued with similar virtues, and both equally dressed, both grow up in love, O monarch, like a couple of chakrabakas. The people of that country are free from illness and are always cheerful. Ten thousand and ten hundred years they live, O king, and never abandon one another. A class of birds called Bharunda, furnished with sharp beaks and possessed of great strength, take them up when dead and throw them into mountain caves. I have now described to thee, O king, the



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Northern Kurus briefly.'")

Brad points out that this sort of material may be consulted on the internet at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuru_\(India\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuru_(India))

It is possible that this connection is not better known among Thoreauvians because this volume that Thoreau consulted was the one which had been stolen from the collection presented to him by Cholmondeley:



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1993

“Stolen Thoreau Book Returned to Concord Museum” (a report by David Wood):

The Concord Museum recently got back, after a fifty-one-year absence, an important volume of Hindu religious literature from Thoreau’s library, the Sanskrit text of *THE BHAGAVAD-GITĀ*, edited by [John Cockburn Thomson](#) and printed in Hertford, England, in 1855.

In 1855, the English writer Thomas Cholmondeley (pronounced Chum-ly) sent to his friend Henry Thoreau forty-four volumes of Oriental philosophical and religious writings, which Thoreau called in his journal “a royal gift.” Included in the gift was a new two-volume edition of *THE BHAGAVAD-GITĀ*, a book Thoreau first read in 1846 while living at [Walden Pond](#). Both volumes, the Sanskrit text and the English translation, are inscribed on the flyleaf in Thoreau’s hand “Henry D. Thoreau from Thomas Cholmondeley.”

When Thoreau died in 1862, he bequeathed some of the Cholmondeley books to Ralph Waldo Emerson; the rest, including the Bhagavad-Gita, he willed to Bronson Alcott, the pioneering educator and member of the inner circle of the Transcendentalists who is best known as the father of Louisa May Alcott. Alcott noted the bequest on the title page of each volume: “A. Bronson Alcott from H.D. Thoreau.” Alcott in turn gave the volumes to Frank Sanborn, Thoreau’s first biographer. After his death, Sanborn’s books were sold at auction, where Stephen Wakeman bought the Bhagavad-Gita. The two volumes made up lot 1072 of the Stephen Wakeman sale held on 24 April 1924. Boston book dealer Charles Goodspeed bought them and sold them to Edward Kittredge. Kittredge gave them to the Concord Antiquarian Society (now the Concord Museum) on the completion of its new building in 1930.

In 1942, the slimmer of the two blue-bound volumes, containing the Sanskrit text, was stolen from the Antiquarian Society. Fifty-one years later, a California collector informed the Museum that he had been offered the book, which, he knew from Walter Harding’s 1983 checklist of the books in Thoreau’s library, had been stolen. The book had apparently entered the library of Philadelphia philanthropist Joshua Bailey in the early 1950s and been sold at auction in the 1970s. The person offering the book for sale had bought it from a San Diego book dealer, who arranged the return of the volume to the Concord Museum.

Edward Kittredge, the donor of the volume to the Concord Antiquarian Society, prophesied its return in a letter to Society president Allen French dated 19 February 1942: “I feel sure the book will turn up some day and be restored to its proper place” Such a book cannot escape detection.... A bibliomaniac saw it, could not resist, and, I hope, has kept it safe. In time, therefore, it should be recovered.”

The book, along with its companion volume, is on exhibit in the Thoreau Gallery at the Concord Museum, 200 Lexington Road, Concord MA.



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On page 990 of Patrick Olivelle's *MANU'S CODE OF LAW: A CRITICAL EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF THE MANAVA-DHARMASASTRA* with the editorial assistance of Suman Olivelle (New York: Oxford UP, 2005; Widener Library call number KNS 127.3 .A4 E547), in an index to the volume, we find the following material:

Kuru. Name of a tribe inhabiting the region of between the upper reaches of the Indus and Ganges rivers during vedic times. This tribe became allied with the Pancalas, who occupied the land to the south-east of the Kurus.

In Chapter 7, item 193 reads:

[The king] should deploy his troops in the direction from which he expects danger; always set up his own camp arrayed in the lotus formation; post the commander-in-chief and the general of the army in every direction; designate the direction from which he expects danger as the frontal direction; deploy on all sides platoons of reliable soldiers with whom signals have been arranged, who are adept both at holding their ground and at pressing an attack, and who are fearless and unwavering; deploy a small group to fight in close quarters and freely spread out a large group; send them into battle arrayed in the needle and the thunderbolt formations; fight with chariots and horses on level ground, with boats and elephants in marshy lands, with bows in areas covered with trees and shrubs, and with swords and shields on flat land; and deploy men from the lands of the Kurus, Matsyas, Pancalas, and Surasenas, as well as tall and agile men, on the front lines.

In Chapter 8, item 92 reads:

This god, Yama the son of Vivasvat [Yama is the god of death and the judge of the dead], dwells in your heart. If you have no quarrel with him, then you do not have to go to the Ganges or the Kuru land [to expiate your sin].

Perhaps the best way to begin to consider the “new legend” of the artist of Kouroo is to quote from the treatment provided it by Charles R. Anderson in his 1968 analysis *THE MAGIC CIRCLE OF WALDEN*, an analysis which seems to make Thoreau out to be one of those strange minds who toy with their own “divinity” and that makes Thoreau’s use of the parable out as merely an argument entirely within the set of images and conventions we understand as “linear time,” a set of images and conventions which inevitably lead to a preoccupation with death:

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If Thoreau could hint at his own divinity by identifying with Apollo from time to time, he could also suggest that he has already achieved immortality. He does so by fashioning a legend of the artist of Kouroo that is a parable of his own life and vocation. It sounds like a Hindu myth, but no one has been able to discover a source for it. Happily it must be taken as an original creation, but rendered so perfectly in the guise of an Oriental scripture as to be mistaken for one. All that came directly from his reading is that Kouroo (Kooroo, Kuru) is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Bhagvat-Geeta* as a sacred land or nation, and is referred to in the Laws of Menu as the country of Brahmanical sages. When Thoreau published his extracts from the last named in *The Dial* for January 1843, he included that reference and, significantly, cited Menu's dictum: "The hand of an artist employed in his art is always pure." All the rest of this legend is Thoreau's own, his most impressive leap of the imagination. It begins:

There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. One day it come into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life.... His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way....

By the time this artist had found a stick suitable for carving, his friends had deserted him, or died, and the city itself was a hoary ruin. Before he had given it proper shape, the dynasty of the Candahars was over, and with the point of his stick he wrote the name of the last of them in the sand. Before he had polished and adorned it, Brahma had slept and waked many times:

But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions.... And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion.... The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

Anderson¹ clinches this shallow interpretation of Thoreau as God-wannabee by a selection of biographical detail:



A final clue identifying the artist of Kouroo as Thoreau, if any were needed, can be found in his letter to a friend, in the context of his own life and work and with a reference to Brahmans: "How admirably the artist is made to accomplish his self-culture by devotion to his art!" The letter was written in December 1853, about the same time the legend was being added to the book. It is clearly a parable of Thoreau's own labors to create a perfect work of art in WALDEN, polishing and revising it through eight separate drafts over a period of as many years – all but literally devoting his life to it. His dedication and singleness of purpose endowed him also "with perennial youth." As the carver of Kouroo aspired upward, fashioning his simple staff, as the original Creator of the pond rounded it with his hand into an object of natural beauty and symbolic significance, so Thoreau shaped his own experience into the magic circle of WALDEN – and then made his leap out of it by translating his facts from earth to heaven. If man is to escape from the trap of time and the limitations of nature, according to this book, he will be able to do so only through the immortality of art.

One might prefer that WALDEN should end here, but there is a tailpiece that risks anticlimax and escapes it by a hair. It brings the flight back to earth, and by returning to the issues of "Economy" brings the book full circle. Following the Kouroo passage there are six pages of sharp comments on the hurry and waste and desperation of life in the modern world. This starts Thoreau's great book running downhill rather fast, to the reader's dismay....

1. Charles R. Anderson. THE MAGIC CIRCLE OF WALDEN. NY, Chicago & San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968



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Yes, if what you are looking for is an “inspirational read,” this sequel does start Thoreau’s great “inspirational read” running downhill rather fast. The fact is that Anderson, looking to be inspired but fully trapped within his own superficial acceptance of the fundamental reality of our notions of temporality, is unable to grasp the connection between the parable of the artist of Kouroo and the talk of desperation which follows it. The parable is a denial of what has come to be known, in philosophical circles, as “consequentialism,” and what follows is a description of the unfortunate affect which is associated with consequentialism in the lives of those afflicted with it. Or, to put the matter another way, there is the most intimate connection between the fancy parable and the hard talk which follows because Thoreau’s parable is a depiction of the real unreality of temporality and the material which Thoreau has positioned following his inventive parable is a description of the sad emotional condition of those like Anderson who are unable to grasp this real unreality of temporality.

For an appreciation of Thoreau’s attitude toward the unreality of our notions of temporality, and of the images by which he sought to teach us also to live in his eternity, see:

TIME AND ETERNITY

You will note in [WALDEN](#) that there is a usage of the word “stock” which we don’t know was intentional. It is the only such usage and we would suppose that it is a printer error for the word “stick,” used elsewhere, yet we know that if it is a printer error, Thoreau failed to mark it for correction in later editions as he did other printer errors. It is this which, I fancy, has given me license to play with the word and name this hypertext “stack” project the “Stack of the Artist of Kouroo.” The other vowel left is “u,” and I hope my project doesn’t get “stuck.”

My candidate for the origin of the parable of the artist of Kouroo occurred in February 1851 while Thoreau was musing on the *geist* of the sort of person who is impressed by railroad and telegraph “progress.” Here, I have cited it in its full context, and you will note that the whittling that is going on is not a staff but the whittling of numbers of wooden stopples, and that the goal of the whittling is not present perfection but great future abundance. In other words, the positive parable of the artist of Kouroo is here growing out of Thoreau’s consideration of the negative mindset of the Etzler:

Walking in the woods it may be some afternoon the shadow
of the wings of a thought flits across the landscape of
my mind And I am reminded how little eventful is our
lives What have been all these wars & survivors of wars
and modern discoveries & improvements so called a mere
irritation in the skin. But this shadow which is so soon
past & whose substance is not detected suggests that
there are events of importance whose interval is to us
a true historic period.

The lecturer is wont to describe the 19th century -the
American the last generation in an offhand & triumphant
strain -wafting him to Paradise spreading his fame by
steam & telegraph -recounting the number of wooden
stopples he has whittled But who does not perceive that
this is not a sincere or pertinent account of any man’s
or nation’s life. It is the hip hip hurrah & mutual
admiration society style. Cars go by & we know their
substance as well as their shadow. They stop & we get
into them. But those sublime thoughts passing on high
do not stop & we never get into them. Their conductor
is not like one of us.

I feel that the man who in his conversation with me
about the life of man in New England lays much stress

TELEGRAPHY

HISTORY OF RR

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on rail-roads telegraphs & such enterprises does not go below the surface of things- He treats the shallow & transitory as if it were profound & enduring in one of the minds avatars in the intervals between sleeping & waking -aye even in one of the interstices of a Hindoo dynasty perchance such things as the 19th century with all its improvements may come & go again. Nothing makes a deep & lasting impression but what is weighty

1851

February 27, Thursday (to March 3): [Henry Thoreau](#) would be surveying, during this period, for Cyrus Stow, a Pine Hill woodlot in the east part of Concord, in the rear of Joseph Merriam's house off Old Bedford Road.

(The invoice for this work has been preserved in the Thoreau Collection at Middlebury College.)

View [Henry Thoreau](#)'s personal working drafts of his surveys courtesy of AT&T and the Concord Free Public Library:

http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollect/Thoreau_Surveys/Thoreau_Surveys.htm

(The official copy of this survey of course had become the property of the person or persons who had hired this Concord town surveyor to do their surveying work during the 19th Century. Such materials have yet to be recovered.)

View this particular personal working draft of a survey in fine detail:

http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollect/Thoreau_Surveys/137.htm



February 27, Thursday: Saw today on Pine Hill behind Mr. Joseph Merriam's House a Norway pine. The first I have seen in Concord— Mr Gleason pointed it out to me as a singular pine which he did not know the name of. It was a very handsome tree about 25 feet high. E Wood thinks that he has lost the surface of 2 acres of his meadow by the ice.— Got 15 cartloads out of a hummock left on another meadow Blue joint was introduced into the first meadow where it did not grow before.

Of two men, one of whom knows nothing about a subject, and what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing—and the other really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all— What great advantage has the latter over the former? Which is the best to deal with?

I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel & grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before. An indefinite sense of the grandeur & glory of the Universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun

But man cannot be said to know in any higher sense, than he can look serenely & with impunity in the face of the sun.

A culture which imports much muck from the meadows & deepens the soil—not that which trusts to heating manures & improved agricultural implements only.

How when a man purchases a thing he is determined to get & get hold of it using how many expletives & how long a string of synonymous or similar terms signifying possession—in the legal process— What's mine's my own. An old Deed of a small piece of swamp land which I have lately surveyed at the risk of being mired past recovery says “that the said Spaulding his Heirs & Assigns, shall and may from time, & at all times forever hereafter, by force & virtue of these presents, lawfully, peaceably and quietly have, hold, use, occupy, possess and enjoy the said swamp &c”

Magnetic iron being anciently found in *Magnesia* hence —magnes or magnet employed by Pliny & others— Chinese appear to have discovered the magnet very early A D 121 & before? used by them to steer ships in 419—mentioned by an Icelander 1068—in a French poem 1181 In Torfaeus Hist of Norway 1266—used by DeGama in 1427 leading stone hence load stone

The peroxide of hydrogen or ozone at first thought to be a chemical curiosity merely is found to be very generally diffused through nature.

The following bears on the floating ice which has risen from the bottom of the meadows— Robert Hunt says “Water conducts heat downward but very slowly; a mass of ice will remain undissolved but a few inches under water, on the surface of which, ether, or any other inflammable body, is burning. If ice swam beneath the surface, the summer sun would scarcely have power to thaw it; and thus our lakes & seas would be gradually

ASTRONOMY

PLINY



KOUROO

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converted into solid masses”²

The figures of serpents of griffins flying dragons and other embellishments of heraldry –the eastern idea of the world on an elephant that on a tortoise & that on a serpent again &c usually regarded as mythological in the com. sense of that word –are thought by Hunt? to “indicate a faint & shadowy knowledge of a previous state of organic existence” –such as geology partly reveals.

The fossil tortoise has been found in Asia large enough to support an elephant.

Ammonites, snake-stones, or petrified snakes have been found from of old –often decapitated.

In the N part of Grt Britain the fossil remains of encrinites are called “St. Cuthbert’s beads.” –“fiction dependant on truth.”

Westward is Heaven or rather heavenward is the west. The way to heaven is from east to west around the earth. The sun leads & shows it. The stars too light it.

Nature & man Some prefer the one others the other; but that is all dè gustibus– It makes no odds at what well you drink, provided it be a well-head.

Walking in the woods it may be some afternoon the shadow of the wings of a thought flits across the landscape of my mind And I am reminded how little eventful is our lives What have been all these wars & survivors of wars and modern discoveries & improvements so called a mere irritation in the skin. But this shadow which is so soon past & whose substance is not detected suggests that there are events of importance whose interval is to us a true historic period.

The lecturer is wont to describe the 19th century –the American the last generation in an offhand & triumphant strain –wafting him to Paradise spreading his fame by steam & telegraph –recounting the number of wooden stopples he has whittled But who does not perceive that this is not a sincere or pertinent account of any man’s or nation’s life. It is the hip hip hurrah & mutual admiration society style. Cars go by & we know their substance as well as their shadow. They stop & we get into them. But those sublime thoughts passing on high do not stop & we never get into them. Their conductor is not like one of us.

I feel that the man who in his conversation with me about the life of man in New England lays much stress on rail-roads telegraphs & such enterprises does not go below the surface of things– He treats the shallow & transitory as if it were profound & enduring in one of the minds avatars in the intervals between sleeping & waking –aye even in one of the interstices of a Hindoo dynasty perchance such things as the 19th century with all its improvements may come & go again. Nothing makes a deep & lasting impression but what is weighty Obey the law which reveals and not the law revealed.

I wish my neighbors were wilder.

A wildness whose glance no civilization could endure.

He who lives according to the highest law –is in one sense lawless That is an unfortunate discovery certainly that of a law which binds us where we did not know that we were bound. Live free –child of the mist. He who for whom the law is made who does not obey the law but whom the law obeys –reclines on pillows of down and is wafted at will whither he pleases –for man is superior to all laws both of heaven & earth. (when he takes his liberty.)

Wild as if we lived on the marrow of antelopes devour raw

There would seem to be men in whose lives there have been no events of importance more than in the beetles which crawls in our path.

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One of the things we can become aware of from the above is that [Thoreau](#) was still processing the information in the materials he checked out last December from Stacy’s Circulating Library in Concord, [Roualeyn George Gordon-Cumming](#)’s account of FIVE YEARS OF A HUNTER’S LIFE IN THE FAR INTERIOR OF SOUTH AFRICA. WITH NOTICES OF THE NATIVE TRIBES, AND ANECDOTES OF THE CHASE OF THE LION, ELEPHANT, HIPPOPOTAMUS, GIRAFFE, RHINOCEROS, &C. (New York: Harper & brothers).

FIVE YEARS IN AFRICA, I

FIVE YEARS IN AFRICA, II

2. Wouldn’t [Henry](#) have been fascinated to learn that Walden Pond originated as a mass of buried, slowly melting ice left behind by glaciation?

OUR MOST RECENT GLACIATION

THE ARTIST OF KOUROO



KOUROO

1999

[Kenneth Walter Cameron](#), in THOREAU'S FUNCTIONAL TRANSCENDENTALISM: HIS WORLD VIEW BASED ON SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE, THE REALITY PRINCIPLE, BUILDING A "SPIRITUAL HOUSE" HERE, AND THE SPIRITUAL MUSIC THAT OFTEN ACCOMPANIES THE EARTHLY,³ took [Thoreau](#)'s "parable or fable of the Artist of Kouroo" in [WALDEN](#) and Emerson's description of the "Orphic Poet" in NATURE as constituting indicative evidence that these Transcendentalists had discovered, somewhere in some secondary literature not as yet identified by us, significant 19th-Century Western references to Taoism.

3. [Kenneth Walter Cameron](#). THOREAU'S FUNCTIONAL TRANSCENDENTALISM: HIS WORLD VIEW BASED ON SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE, THE REALITY PRINCIPLE, BUILDING A "SPIRITUAL HOUSE" HERE, AND THE SPIRITUAL MUSIC THAT OFTEN ACCOMPANIES THE EARTHLY / by Kenneth Walter Cameron. Hartford CT: Transcendental Books, 1999



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WALDEN: There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life. He proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it should not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and rejected stick after stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for they grew old in their works and died, but he grew not older by a moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a stock in all respects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and he sat on one of its mounds to peel the stick. Before he had given it the proper shape the dynasty of the Candahars was at an end, and with the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last of that race in the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoke and slumbered many times. But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

ARTIST OF KOUROO

Here are [Professor Cameron](#)'s general remarks:

The parable or fable of the Artist of Kouroo sheds much light on Thoreau's principles and beliefs about the conduct of life. Like him the Artist must have lived in a one-room hut to be able so successfully to concentrate on his goal. That he lived in voluntary poverty is evident from his preoccupation with his work and the opinions held by his contemporaries, who could not understand him. Like Thoreau he probably lived outside the mail-delivery area, preferring to be undisturbed while searching for the right kind of wood with his singleness of purpose. Like



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Thoreau, too, he "drove life into a corner" of Kouroo in order to achieve something he regarded as important while his critics developed stomach ulcers in their Kouroo rat-race!! Like Thoreau he manifested no escapist tendencies – no inclination to "read up" on the Perennial Philosophy and join its nearest phalanx, or engage in the favorite pastime of spending hours contemplating his navel or repeating the word OM. Like Thoreau his achievement with the perfect staff was the result of discipline and deliberate ACTION. That the fable has relevance to the example of Thoreau himself must never be forgotten!

Although the above ruminations might not seem to take us very far, Professor Cameron went on to explore a hypothesis that Thoreau's insertion of his "parable or fable of the Artist of Kouroo" in WALDEN constitutes indicative evidence that Thoreau had uncovered, somewhere in some secondary literature not as yet identified by us, significant 19th-Century Western references to Taoism:

The parable concluding Walden for which we have as yet found no "source" stresses the following points:

- (1) The artist was "disposed to strive after perfection," his making a "perfect staff" required on his part "singleness of purpose," "resolution," and "elevated piety."
- (2) At the "finishing stroke" his staff "suddenly expanded ... into the fairest of all the creations," i.e., underwent a metamorphosis.
- (3) "The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?" In other words, there had been rapport between the agent and the object.
- (4) Though much time seems to have been involved in the labor, the lapse was actually illusory.

One sees similarities between the procedures of the Kouroo artist and the recommended procedures given by the Orphic Poet in Nature:

- (1) Emerson characterizes "fallen man" as having his "axis of vision not coincident with the axis of things" with the result that he "cannot be a naturalist" -that is, deal with the natural world- "until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit." He must experience a "redemption of the soul."
- (2) If he will exercise his "ideal force" on nature he will meet with amazing results. "As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind" the outer world "will unfold its great proportions.... So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes."
- (3) The final advice is: "Build, therefore, your own world." By conforming your life to the "pure idea in your mind" you will bring about a "corresponding revolution in things."



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I detect a Taoist coloring in the words of both the Artist and the Orphic Poet.

Somewhere, I suspect, in one of the numerous volumes of Contes that circulated in Europe during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries -for example, in Contes Chinois, Contes Orientaux, or Contes Asiatiques- or even in a textbook like a French reader, Thoreau may have come upon the fable of the Carpenter or Wood-carver of the state of Lu, described by Chuang-Tzu (B.C. ca. 365-290), a Taoist of considerable charm and influence. Since the 1870s in the West, at least, it appears in many editions of his works within a chapter variously translated "The Secret of Life" or "The Interpretation of Life."



I give herewith three modern translations or paraphrases:

 Tsze K'ing was carving wood to make a bell-frame. When the thing was completed, all who saw it were astonished at the extraordinary ingenuity displayed. When the Marquis of Lu saw it, he asked Tsze K'ing, saying, "What legerdemain have you been practising to produce this?"—"Your servant is a simple workman," was the reply; "what legerdemain should he practise? Nevertheless, there is a knack about it. When your servant is about to make a bell-frame, he does not venture to squander his energies, and it is necessary to practise abstinence in order to obtain equanimity. Having fasted for three days, he does not venture to dwell upon the honours and emoluments with which he may be rewarded. Having fasted for five days, he does not venture to dwell upon the censures or eulogies that may be called forth by his dexterity or lack of skill. Having fasted for seven days, he suddenly loses self-consciousness; and when he has got so far, it is no longer to him as though he were working for the Court. Then his skilfulness is concentrated; all outward phantasies are annulled. Afterwards he goes into the mountain-forest to examine the qualities of the wood, and see which (tree) is best adapted for a bell-frame by its form. At last, when he sees the frame in the uncarved wood, he puts hand to work and cuts it out. If this method be not followed, the thing cannot be made.—This is bringing my natural qualities into correspondence with the natural qualities of the wood.

NOTE.—In the original this runs, 則以天合天.

So that in making implements the mind must be rigorously set; and that is all about it."



Ch'ing, the chief carpenter,
Of the Lu State.

was carving wood into a stand for hanging musical instruments. When finished, the work appeared to those who saw it as though of supernatural execution. And the prince of Lu asked him, saying, "What mystery is there in your art ?"

"No mystery, your Highness," replied Ch'ing ; "and yet there is something.

"When I am about to make such a stand, I guard against any diminution of my vital power. I first reduce my mind to absolute quiescence. Three days in this condition, and I become oblivious of any reward to be gained. Five days, and I become oblivious of any fame to be acquired. Seven days, and I become unconscious of my four limbs and my physical frame. Then, with no thought of the Court present to my mind, my skill becomes concentrated, and all disturbing elements from without are gone. I enter some mountain forest. I search for a suitable tree. It contains the form required, which is afterwards elaborated. I see the stand in my mind's eye, and then set to work. Otherwise, there is nothing. I bring my own natural capacity into relation with that of the wood. What was suspected to be of supernatural execution in my work was due solely to this."

To obliteration of self in the infinite causality of God.

Theology Through the Looking Glass

by Richard E. Wentz 

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... In the writings of Chuang Tzu there's a piece called "The Woodcarver":

Khing, the master carver, made a bell stand of precious wood. When it was finished, all who saw it were astounded. They said it must be the work of spirits. The Prince of Lu said to the master carver, "What is your secret?"

Khing replied: "I am only a workman. I have no secret. There is only this: when I began to think about the work you commanded I guarded my spirit, did not expend it on trifles that were not to the point. I fasted in order to set my heart at rest. After three days of fasting, I had forgotten gain and success. After five days I had forgotten gain or criticism. After seven days I had forgotten my body with all its limbs.

"By this time all thought of your Highness and the court had faded away. All that might distract me from my work had vanished. I was collected in the single thought of the bell stand. Then I went to the forest to see the trees in their own natural state. When the right tree appeared before my eyes, the bell stand also appeared in it, clearly, beyond doubt. All I had to do was to put forth my hand and begin. If I had not met this particular tree there would have been no bell stand at all. What happened? My own collected thought encountered the hidden potential in the wood; from this live encounter came the work which you ascribe to the spirits."

...

Despite a good recent bibliography of Thoreau's reading we are still ignorant of the wide extent of it because, unlike Emerson, he was indifferent to documentation. (One can note this fact by comparing the Journal with the Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks.) Until quite recently few of us suspected that Thoreau had drawn documents for his article on Buddha in The Dial from La Revue Indépendante 1843, and we still do not know from whom or from what institution he borrowed it in order



to make his translation. may, therefore, at least hazard the guess that once he had handled such a useful source of oriental scripture he might have glanced through earlier and later issues as well. In 1844, the following year, that journal carried two articles by Jean Pierre Guillaume Pauthier which would have captured his interest, especially the second, which contained a discussion of "Khoung-Tseu," from which I take the following five (5) quotations:



(1) CHUANG-TZU'S FAME



Oui, sans doute, KHOUNG-TSEU
a été l'apôtre infatigable de la justice
et de la raison, et c'est là ce qui fait sa
gloire, et c'est là ce qui justifie ces pa-
roles d'un empereur chinois, gravées
sur le frontispice des temples élevés
dans toute la Chine à notre philosophe,
qu'il est le plus grand, le plus saint
et le plus vertueux des instituteurs du
genre humain qui ont paru sur la
terre !

(2) SEEKING PERFECTION IS THE SOVEREIGN GOOD

la doctrine morale de
KHOUNG-TSEU a été le plus nettement
exposée, et qu'elle a reçue, pour ainsi
dire, sa formule métaphysique. Le
philosophe chinois part du principe que
l'homme est un être qui a reçu du Ciel,
en même temps que la vie physique,
un principe de vie morale qu'il doit
cultiver et développer dans toute son
étendue, afin de pouvoir arriver à la
perfection, conformément au modèle
céleste et divin.

« La loi de la grande étude (dit-il
« dans le *Tâ-hio*), ou de l'étude propre
« aux hommes raisonnables, de la phi-
« losophie pratique, consiste à déve-
« lopper et remettre en lumière le prin-
« cipe lumineux de la raison que nous
« avons reçu du Ciel, à renouveler les
« hommes, et à placer sa destination
« définitive dans la perfection ou le
« souverain bien. » (§ 1.)

(3) THE HEAVENLY COMMAND



« *Le mandat du ciel s'appelle nature rationnelle ou morale; le principe qui nous dirige dans la conformité de nos actions avec la nature rationnelle s'appelle droite voie, raison (Tdo); le système coordonné de la droite voie, de la raison, s'appelle Doctrine des devoirs ou Institutions sociales.* » (§ 1.)

Le commentateur *Tchou-hi* s'exprime ainsi sur ce passage important :

« *Le mandat du ciel est comme un ordre, une mission reçue; la nature rationnelle ou morale, c'est la voie droite, la raison. Le Ciel, par le moyen du Yin et du Yang ou du principe femelle et du principe mâle et des cinq éléments, donne la naissance, par génération et par transformation, à tous les êtres de l'univers. Le principe matériel aéiforme et primogène (khi) développe les formes de ces êtres, et la raison (li) leur est aussi attribuée, conférée, donnée comme un mandat, un ordre.* Il suit de là que la vie (sing) de l'homme, aussi bien que celle des autres êtres vivants (we), par cela même que chacun d'eux a obtenu ce principe rationnel qui lui est conféré, est considérée comme constituée pour se conformer aux prescriptions des cinq vertus cardinales; c'est ce que l'on appelle la nature rationnelle (sing [*]). L'homme, ainsi que les autres êtres produits, obéissent chacun à leur propre principe ou raison d'être, aux lois spéciales de leur propre nature (sing-tchi-tseu-jen); alors leur action opérée journallement est intrinsèque ou réside en eux-mêmes.



(4) THE "REASON" IN MAN IS SUPERIOR TO MATTER

Le fondement de la morale de KHOUNG-TSOU est ainsi déterminé de manière à exclure formellement tout mobile qui ne rentrerait pas dans les prescriptions de la raison, de cette raison universelle, émanée du Ciel, et que toutes les créatures ont reçue en partage. Aussi, sa morale est-elle la plus pure qui ait jamais été enseignée aux hommes, et en même temps, ce qui est plus important peut-être, la plus conforme à leur nature.

Il est bien démontré, par les citations précédentes, que KHOUNG-TSOU reconnaissait dans l'homme un principe supérieur à la matière, un principe intelligent et doué de raison, de cette raison souveraine que nous recevons du Ciel. Ce principe, selon son interprète, est immatériel. Nous pourrions, par conséquent, le nommer *âme*, si nous n'attachions pas à ce dernier mot une idée de pérennité individuelle, si nous pouvions nous exprimer ainsi, que les philosophes chinois n'attachent pas à leur *principe rationnel* de l'homme. En effet, l'*âme*, dans leur opinion, lorsque la mort vient opérer la séparation du corps, retourne se perdre dans le Ciel, où elle n'a plus d'existence propre et individuelle, ainsi qu'on peut le constater des textes suivants :

(5) PERFECTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF IS CENTRAL

Le perfectionnement de soi-même est le principe fondamental de la morale de KHOUNG-TSEU, comme il doit l'être de tout enseignement qui aspire à diriger les actions humaines. Son grand but, c'est d'arriver à la perfection. « Il y a un principe certain, dit le disciple Tseu-sse, pour reconnaître l'état de perfection. Celui qui ne sait pas distinguer le bien du mal, le vrai du faux, qui ne sait pas reconnaître dans l'homme le mandat du Ciel, n'est pas encore arrivé à la perfection. » (Ib., ch. 20.)

Il faut distinguer entre le parfait et la perfection. Cette dernière seule peut être obtenue par l'homme. Selon le philosophe chinois, le parfait, le vrai dégagé de tout mélange est la loi du Ciel; la perfection ou le perfectionnement, qui consiste à employer tous ses efforts pour découvrir et suivre la loi céleste, le vrai principe du mandat du Ciel, est la loi de l'homme. Par conséquent, il faut que l'homme atteigne la perfection pour accomplir sa propre loi.

Mais pour que l'homme puisse accomplir sa loi, il faut qu'il la connaisse. Or, la mission de la leur faire connaître est réservée aux hommes qui, étant arrivés à leur perfection,

In 1843, moreover, Pauthier had issued in Paris his translation of Les Livres Sacrees de l'Orient containing inter alia "Le chou-King," a work which Chuang-Tsu is supposed to have edited and altered — a work dealing with metamorphoses and transformations (including self-transformations). A useful modern introduction to Chuang-Tzu and to recent scholarship on his special variety of Taoism is Richard P. Benton's article in Great Lives from History, ed. Frank N. Magill, Pasadena, California (Salem Press), 1988, II, 512-517. I suggest that the student of American literature might do well to give some attention to this Chinese sage and others of his school since even the transformation of our "Rip Van Winkle" was foreshadowed by them:

The doctrine of metempsychosis, indeed, was inculcated by Chuang



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Tsze himself, in a mystic passage which will be found at the end of the first volume of his Divine Classic. "Fuel which is on fire," he says, "will soon be consumed; but the fire itself, if transmitted, will burn on inexhaustibly." The fuel here stands for the human body, the fire for the immortal soul; which, when by its constant action it has worn out one corporeal encasement, will still continue to exist in any other that may be provided for it. This is another instance in which Western superstition has been derived from [Chinese](#) sources. Even Rip Van Winkle was a Taoist patriarch originally, named Wang Chih, who lived under the dynasty of Tsin. His legend as related by Mr. Mayers is well worth recording. Wandering one day upon some mountains in search of fuel, he discovered a grotto in which were seated several aged men intent on a game of chess. He laid down his axe, entered the cave, and looked on at the game, in the course of which one of the old men handed him something in shape and size like a date-stone, telling him to put it in his mouth. No sooner had he tasted it than he became oblivious of hunger and thirst. After some time had elapsed, one of the players looked up at him, and said, "It is a long while since you came here; you should go home now!" Whereupon Wang Chih, proceeding to pick up his axe, found that its handle had mouldered into dust. On repairing to his house he discovered that centuries had passed since the time when he had left it for the mountains, and that no vestige of his kinfolk remained. Retiring to a retreat among the hills he thereupon devoted himself to the rites of Taoism and finally attained immortality. Such is the [Chinese](#) version of the tale.



2004

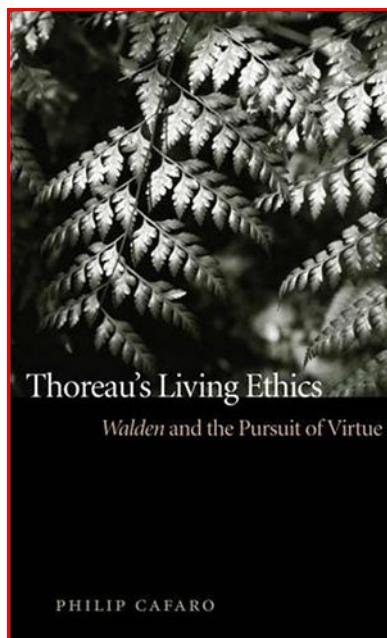
Footnote 48 in [Philip Cafaro](#)'s chapter on Virtue in THOREAU'S LIVING ETHICS: WALDEN AND THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE⁴ offers a novel moralistic take on Thoreau's parable of the artist of Kouroo:

In an influential essay titled "Moral Luck," Bernard Williams uses the example of Gauguin deserting his family to move to Tahiti, in order to question the claims of morality. [Williams, Bernard. MORAL LUCK: PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS 1973-1980. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981] Williams suggests that Gauguin might not have had to fulfill his familial obligations, if these conflicted with his project to become a great painter; or at least, that we might be glad that he did not fulfill those obligations. The parable of the artist of Kouroo suggests that Thoreau yearned for the kind of freedom Gauguin took. But again, he could never have justified such an abdication of duty.

Professor Cafaro has on pages 71-74 of this book explicated the parable of the artist of Kouroo simplistically by equating Thoreau himself as the "artist" of the parable, and equating the "world" he has made with the book WALDEN (Thoreau's book was divided into 18 chapters, Cafaro alleges, "probably" because the translation of the *BHAGAVAD-GITA* he read had been divided into 18 sections!):

In his journal for 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "I owed -my friend and I owed- a magnificent day to the *BHAGAVAT-GITA*. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing

4. [Philip Cafaro](#). THOREAU'S LIVING ETHICS: WALDEN AND THE PURSUIT OF VIRTUE. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2004





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small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us." Thoreau valued the *BHAGAVAD-GITA* as highly as any other book, both for the sublimity of its cosmology and for its noble ethical ideals. It is probably not accidental that *WALDEN*, like the *GITA*, is divided into eighteen chapters, or that both works move from images of despair and uncertainty in their initial pages to statements of triumphant, life-affirming resolution in their final ones. This sacred Hindu scripture points us toward one possible resolution of the conflict between duty and virtue, for it sees adherence to duty as the highest virtue. ... As Hinduism's premier ethical scripture, the *GITA* suggests that each of us have our own "fields of duty" to which we are called. No matter how lowly they seem, they are ours, and we, like the greatest of heroes, may fulfill our sacred duty within them. Thoreau echoes this position in *WALDEN*: "However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names." The ancient scripture also suggests that different members of society may have very different duties, tied to particular stations in life, admonishing: "better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do another man's well." Thoreau finds this moral particularism appealing. Toward the end of *WALDEN*, he provides a parable that evokes the *GITA* with special reference to his own artistic vocation:

WALDEN: There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life. He proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it should not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and rejected stick after stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for they grew old in their works and died, but he grew not older by a moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a stock in all respects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and he sat on one of its mounds to peel the stick. Before he had given it the proper shape the dynasty of the Candahars was at an end, and with the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last of that race in the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoke and slumbered many times. But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

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Clearly Thoreau is himself the artist of this parable, while the "world" he has made is WALDEN. ... We may better understand Thoreau's and the *GITA*'s different valuations of personal choice and moral certainty if we return to the parable of "the artist of Kouroo." Thoreau's own pursuit of excellence involved artistic creation and the solitude, focus, and self-absorption necessary to achieve it. He well knew the conflicts between the demands of art and everyday life and between personal and familial duties. The parable presents the artist's fantasy of



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perfection and importance: the work itself becomes a world; the creation of this ideal world balancing out any moral failures in the real one. Such single-mindedness **is** faithfulness to duty, Thoreau wants to believe. Only thus are the greatest achievements possible. Such faithfulness to duty takes precedence over all conventional duties to friends and family. In the face of great artistic (even cosmic) achievements, any conventional moral failures are unimportant. Perhaps the passage is directed specifically at budding artistic geniuses. Perhaps all of us, like the artist of Kouroo, may choose new commitments and follow them through, whatever it takes – provided we fully dedicate ourselves to them.

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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

– Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: April 7, 2014

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.