Literary Transcendentalism

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Most of Thoreau's works might be described as catalogues extended through time and space. His favorite form, as noted earlier, is the romantic excursion: a ramble ("Walking") or trip (Cape Cod) or sojourn (Walden) which takes on overtones of a spiritual quest as the speaker proceeds. Thoreau's later journals have the same rhythm. Like the conversation, the sermon, and the essay, the excursion is also a potentially encyclopedic form. Though somewhat more controlled by the obligation to describe a particular setting, it tends to become, in effect, an account of the whole universe as it appears to the speaker, particularly in the two books Thoreau published during his lifetime. This comprehensiveness is due in large part to the extraordinary gift for microcosm which Emerson was the first to notice in him, the ability to infer the "universal law from the single fact" (W, X, 474). This very transcendental mode of perception gives rise to what John Broderick rightly calls the fundamental movement of Thoreau's prose—from observation to speculation and back again—and to his breadth of allusion. Thoreau did not travel far in his lifetime; but, as John Christie has shown, his imagination ranged throughout the world.1

Whereas Emerson built his essays around concepts of universal order, Thoreau began with his environment and tried to invest it with meaning. Temporal continuity in his writing is usually more important than the continuity of abstract ideas which unifies Emerson's prose and characterizes most of the rest of Transcendentalist literature. Thoreau's excursions, consequently, cannot be considered as typical of the movement to the same degree as the forms and techniques discussed earlier. Still, the excursions can be called representative in the Emersonian sense, in that they attempt to carry out to practical fulfilment the spirit of the Transcendentalists' largely theoretical fascination with nature. Nearly all of Thoreau's adult life was devoted to proving the validity of correspondence in his own experience. Few of the Transcendentalists except for the Concord group took Thoreau's example very seriously, at least during his lifetime, but most endorsed both the general principle of living close to nature and the romantic excursion as a literary form.

Thoreau's choice of form reflected the prevailing taste of his age. Travel writing of various kinds had always been very popular in America: scientific expeditions (e.g. Darwin's *Voyage of a Naturalist Round the World*), records of exploration (Brackenridge's *Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri*), shipwreck and captivity narratives (Melville's *Typee*), grand tours of foreign and domestic parts by literary gentlefolk (Goethe's *Italienische Reise*), and so forth. Indeed on both sides of the Atlantic, in the early years of the 19th century, it seemed to one reviewer that almost everybody who "happens once in his life to wander from the precincts of his own native village, thinks it his duty to enlighten the publick with a narrative of his adventures." 2 The *North American Review* regularly devoted two or three major articles each year to travel books; Thoreau is known to have

read at least 146 of them, including all the works just listed.³

There were several reasons for the vogue of travel writing, especially in America: the rise of romanticism;⁴ the largely unexplored condition of America; the self-consciousness and provincialism of the new nation, which stimulated intense interest among Americans in European travelers' reports about them and in compatriots' reports of Europe;⁵ and the didactic orientation of the American aesthetic. Like lyceum lectures, travel literature could be delightful without ceasing to be ostensibly instructive. Fascinating glimpses of exotic spots could be purveyed as "scientific information." Such works were also relatively easy to produce. "He must be dull indeed," one critic declared, "who cannot give a tolerably interesting account of very interesting places."⁶

For all these reasons, many of the prominent serious and popular writers in America during the nineteenth century tried their hand at travel writing, including the Transcendentalists.

³ Christie, p. 42. Actually, his bibliography of those works (pp. 313-333) excludes a few works which might also be put into the travel literature category, such as William Gilpin's Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views, a book which is as close or closer to Thoreau's own sort of travel book than almost any of the 146 listed works.


Poe wrote two fictional narratives; Melville began as a travel romancer; Cooper's fiction has a strong travel interest, as does Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*; Washington Irving, Bayard Taylor, and George William Curtis each wrote several literary travelogues. Among the Transcendentalists, the roster of travel books includes not only Thoreau's work but also Emerson's *English Traits*, Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* and *At Home and Abroad*, Bartol's *Pictures of Europe*, James F. Clarke's *Eleven Weeks in Europe*, and (in a sense) Ellery Channing's *Conversations in Rome*. These books varied widely in style and scope and quality, from the hurried reportage of Clarke and Fuller's European book to the analytical overview of *English Traits* to Bartol's serious attempt at prose poetry. But all share a basically literary, rather than factual, approach. To the extent that they make any claims on the reader's attention, then or now, it is as imaginative reinterpretations of their subject rather than as guidebooks or as compendia of information, although they do supply generous amounts of data and moral directive. All the Transcendentalist authors, especially those who traveled in Europe, were well aware that they were going over ground already covered many times before, and that their own contribution, such as it was, would consist in supplying new points of view—in deploying the resources of their wit, descriptive ability, capacity for original reflection, and eye for the out-of-the-way detail.

Literary criticism of travel writing is still in its infancy, and virtually nothing has been written about the formal conventions of such works, partly because the genre is so miscellaneous.

Most of the extant criticism deals with content rather than style. Christie is representative: on Thoreau's interest in travel, travel reading, and allusions to travel books, he is definitive; on problems of form he is sketchy. But see his last two chapters (pp. 245-271) for some discussion of the travel book as a formal model for Thoreau. I know of no satisfactory study of the stylistic conventions of American travel writing during the early nineteenth century, though of course much has been done on the interest of writers in Europe and the frontier.
The travels of Marco Polo, Harriet Martineau, Thor Heyerdal, and D. H. Lawrence apparently have little in common; even the Transcendentalist works listed above vary greatly in style and structure. Nevertheless, some generalizations can be made about the state of travel writing in the early nineteenth century which will help clarify Thoreau’s literary purposes and those of the Transcendentalists as a whole.

To start with, we must realize that the literary travel book was then in a transitional state, just beginning (in America at least) to be distinguished from a factual account or analysis, but not yet recognized as different in kind. For Howells and James, living in the era after the Civil War, travel writing was unambiguously an art, to be judged by the same high standards of stylistic refinement and formal coherence as would be applied to prose fiction. James, for example, considered the traditional epistolary or journalistic methods of organizing travel books unsatisfactory even for a talented writer: “His work will doubtless furnish a considerable amount of entertaining; but there will yet be something essentially common in its character. The book will be diffuse, overgrown, shapeless; it will not belong to literature.” 8 Earlier critics, however, were less stringent in their literary standards than James, though they too complained of the slipshod ease with which many such works were written. Jared Sparks, for example, was inclined to think that “the eye of criticism should pass gently over the pages of the traveller,—it should be contented with gazing on what is new and interesting from its intrinsic value, although it may not be dressed out in so good a taste, and under so attracting a form as could be desired.” 9 This remark suggests that the reviewer looks to travel literature primarily for new information, rather than for high art. Sure enough, he continues: “There is one indispens-
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able requisite however, in books of travels, without which they can have neither interest nor value;—we mean veracity.” 10

Inaccuracy is to Sparks what “want of method” is to James, and the same applies to most other early North American reviewers. The primary demand they made of the travel writer was that he be “a just and clear observer”—especially if he happened to be a European traveling in the United States.11

Travelers who mixed fact and fancy were suspect, even if their writing showed talent. Francis Bowen objected to George Borrow’s account of the Gypsies on the ground that imaginative liberties “seriously impair[ed] the credibility of the book.” 12

Another critic scoffed at what he called “imaginative” travelers who went to the Holy Land “in order to write poetry,” since “their journals are not trustworthy records of what they saw and heard.” 13 Two Years before the Mast was highly regarded not because it was well-written, although Boston reviewers agreed that it was, but because it gave an “accurate” and above all moralistic description of the life of sailors. Its fictive virtues were, in the opinion of the Christian Examiner, a positive disadvantage, inasmuch as they tended to lure the reader into sea-faring.14

When the reviewers of the 1820s and 1830s took it upon themselves to outline a model for prospective travel writers to follow, what they usually recommended, therefore, was not that the genre should become more amusing or more elegant or more imaginative but that it should be more rigorously analytical. “The only sort of travels that will, we think, hereafter be much

10 Ibid.
13 C. Emerson, “Robinson’s Travels in Palestine and Arabia,” ibid., 53 (1841), 176.
14 William Ware, “Two Years before the Mast,” Christian Examiner, 29 (1840), 270. See also Edward Tyrell Channing’s review in the North American Review, 52 (1841), 56–75.
sought for,” opined Edward Everett, will concentrate rather “on topics of statistical and political information, on the condition, pursuits, and manners of the people, than on pictures, statues, and ruins.” An entertaining popularizer with a careful eye for detail was welcome, another reviewer conceded, but what the field really needed was more “rigidly honest” scholarly investigators.

The concession is significant, however. Apart from their role as arbiters of taste, the reviewers did appreciate travel literature for its entertainment value; and they were also aware of, and to some extent sympathetic to, a growing popular interest in imaginative travels, coinciding with the rise of the romantic movement. One critic traced travelers’ preoccupations with “fanciful speculations” to the influence of Mme de Staël’s Germany; other sources were Wordsworth’s poetry and Byron’s Childe Harold; eighteenth-century topographical poetry and prose picturesque; and the sentimental journeys of Sterne and Goethe. The collective impact of these influences was such as to encourage a more subjective and loosely “poetic” approach to travel description. Though Boston reviewers could not, as a matter of principle, prefer it to the factual approach, they were capable of appreciating it when they met with it in a favorite author like Washington Irving. The North American Review even printed an occasional excerpt or manuscript by subjective-poetical travelers. One such example is the record of a short “Pedestrian Tour” of New England by one “H. Tudor” in 1817. Here is an excerpt:

June 1st. To Keene, 43 miles.—Overslept ourselves at Pepperell, set off after breakfast, and walked six miles, then being tired of moving so slow from home, took the stage, and arrived here at

8, P.M. We have passed to day through a number of "clever towns," but have seen nothing worth remarking, except the Monadnock mountain, at a distance, and seven beautiful girls en passant, which I have observed this day; it is remarkable, and I mention it for the benefit of artists, what a fine, warm, and mellow tone, objects like these, in the front ground, give to a landscape; one of these maidens, with a sparkling, open countenance, rose-tinted, transparent complexion, falling shoulders, and rounded arms, light elastic step, small foot, and tapering ankle, [sic] (it must be observed that,

\[\text{Brachia et vultum, teretesque suras} \]
\[\text{Integer laude}\]

formed one of the most picturesque studies I ever saw, and I sighed that I was not an artist. The latter part of this road is a gentle descent for two miles, shaded by tall trees, and with a fine stream running by the road side.\(^{19}\)

Tudor's log resembles Thoreau's usual travel style, despite obvious differences, in its day-by-day structure, its attempt to intermix facts and entertainment, its academic wit, and its tendency to overrefine ideas. There is no reason to believe that Thoreau ever saw Tudor's account but he would have found some of the same qualities in authors he did read, such as Gilpin, Goethe, Purchas, and Sterne.

As the century progressed, the imaginative approach to travel-writing continued to gain ground, not only because the romantic movement encouraged an expressivist approach to writing

\(^{19}\) *North American Review*, 4 (1817), 176–177. This style should be contrasted with that of another New England traveler, whose work Thoreau knew well, Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (1822; rpt., ed. Barbara Solomon [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969]). Dwight's book is a compendium of information on the region, based on many years and some 18,000 miles of traveling. It was books like Dwight's, which in themselves had enough of the quaintness of amateurism to appeal to the imagination of a Thoreau, that led to more scholarly accounts of their subject on the one hand, and supplied the factual groundwork for more creative travelers like Thoreau on the other.
and an idealized view of exotic locations and the life of adventure, but also in part because the sheer volume of previous travel books had made it impossible to say anything distinctive about the usual watering places unless one was extremely creative, or else intimidatingly thorough. Gone were the days when "the mere circumstance of traveling" was thought sufficient to allow a gentleman "the right of forcing on the public an account of his breakfasts and nights' lodgings." 20 The gentleman amateur and his wilderness counterpart, the untutored explorer, were being replaced by two different kinds of reporters: the professional writer on the one hand and the professional historian, sociologist, geographer, naturalist, or archaeologist on the other. Even today it is still of course possible for anyone who circumnavigates the globe in a small sailboat or travels to mainland China to publish his impressions, just as in the early nineteenth century any literate person who had seen Japan or Tahiti or Africa was assured of an American audience and a review in the North American. But the opportunities for amateurs are much more limited now, and during the nineteenth century they shrank progressively. George William Curtis summed up the situation for the literary travelogue in 1855 when he declared that if the work is not "poetic" it will be "soon forgotten." 21

The center of literary interest in such writing, Curtis goes on to say, is not what the traveler sees or the adventures he experiences, but the self-portrayal of the traveller himself. 22 In this, as in several other respects, Curtis was the child of Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists, in general, departed from the Unitarian line of travel-writing in the same way they did on other issues: by stressing the importance of the individual mind over that of empirical fact. Caleb Stetson, for example, reviewing Fuller's Summer on the Lakes, was pleased to find that she "is much more occupied with what is passing in her own soul,

22 Ibid., p. 568.
than with the objective realities which present themselves to the senses.” His only complaint was that “she does not let her thought or emotion write itself out” sufficiently. Frederic Hedge, in the same vein, declared that what “we care to read about” in travel books is not paintings and churches and rivers and mountains, “but the reflection of these in genial and original minds. The most interesting travels are those that have the least to say about the very things which we go abroad to see,—such books as Eothen, and the Sentimental Journey. . . . For the same reason, we like travels at home better than travels abroad.” Hedge’s last sentence touches upon the essential idea of travel as expressed in “Self-Reliance” and the “Conclusion” to Walden. True travel is spiritual travel, an exploration of one’s own higher latitudes. Travel is interpreted, in other words, in the same idealized way as the religious terminology discussed in Chapter 4, above. Actual travel is useless, in the Transcendentalist view of things; the chances are that it may even be a stumbling block to spiritual advancement, like the doctrine of miracles. For example, Emerson’s principal notion about travel, based on personal experience, was that in most cases it signifies a futile attempt at self-escape (W, II, 80–82; VI, 145–146). He and other Transcendentalist travelers, therefore, hedged their reports with admonishment that home is best, that travel is merely a preparative to better living at home. “The traveller learns many precious lessons,” effused Bartol, “but perhaps the most precious of them all, for which alone it is well worth one’s while to take a long journey, as perhaps else it cannot be learned, is that the crown of life is in no change of place, but is to be in one’s home.”

Not that Bartol and other Transcendentalist travelers sought to deny the peripatetic impulse, however—far from it. They simply desired to make it spiritually valid, or, in Thoreau’s

24 “European Travel,” ibid., 53 (1852), 240.
25 Pictures of Europe (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1855), p. 15.
case, to make the best of their inability to gratify it fully. Such motives reinforced their natural literary predilection for the abstract and subjective dimension. Emerson talked about his experience in England in terms of an analysis of the essence of the English character; Bartol used the scenes he saw on the continent as illustrations for moral meditations; Fuller (in *Summer on the Lakes*) and Thoreau interspersed descriptive sketches with verse fragments, prose poetry, and quaint bits of historical lore. In all these cases one becomes conscious of an interplay between the sequence of actual observations and the interests of a subjectively imposed mood or design. Neither dominates to the exclusion of the other; rather, the works oscillate between the two structural principles.

This sort of oscillation, which is to be found in many literary travelogues of the romantic period as well as among the Transcendentalists, was one of the features of the genre which most perplexed conservative critics. Edward Everett, for instance, enjoyed Irving's *A Tour of the Prairies*, but did not know quite what to make of it:

To what class of compositions the present work belongs, we are hardly able to say. It can scarcely be called a book of travels, for there is too much painting of manners, and scenery, and too little statistics;—it is not a novel, for there is no story; and it is not a romance, for it is all true. It is a sort of sentimental journey, a romantic excursion, in which nearly all the elements of several different kinds of writing are beautifully and gaily blended into a production almost *sui generis*.

Thoreau had but a limited interest in the purely picturesque; but his mode of writing does resemble Irving’s in most of the ways listed here—in its descriptive, peripatetic, and miscellaneous or hybrid character: part sketch, part information, part narrative, part wit, part philosophy. This resemblance is well worth insisting upon, as a reminder that the Thoreauvian ex-

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cursion is not a great deal more sui generis than Irving's actually was. Thoreau criticism of the last few decades has tended to convey this impression by its intense concentration upon the intricacies of his literary strategies. 27 Much of this scholarship has been first-rate, and it has succeeded admirably in showing Thoreau's dedication to his vocation as a writer. But in the process it has created a somewhat unbalanced picture of his work, and by extension that of other romantic travelers also.

In the first place, the prevailing critical approach to Thoreau carries with it the somewhat misleading implication that literary architectonics was (or should have been) of immense concern to him. In fact, none of his books, not even Walden, is very tightly unified, nor probably designed to be, for the romantic excursion is as much a record of events and impressions as it is a poem. Even in the course of so analytical a work as Walden, there are all sorts of meanderings and digressions: the song the speaker sings when chopping timber, the length of the diatribe against philanthropy, the inclusion of the "complemental verses," and

so forth. It is not that these passages bear no relation to the overall drift of the book, but that their charm lies more in their heterogeneity and unpredictableness than in their contribution to an overarching whole. Like a Whitman catalogue, Thoreau’s writing is to be more appreciated as process than as product, more for its irregular flow than for any patterns which can be abstracted from it, although the awareness of such patterns naturally enhances one’s pleasure in the work.

A related problem with Thoreau criticism is that it has overemphasized the symbolic implications of Thoreau’s writing, to the point that one recent analyst of *Walden* has felt obliged to argue that the book really does have a factual level. Yes, that was a real loon, a real woodchuck—they are not just metaphors. Like all literary travel narratives, *Walden* is an aesthetic mongrel, a mixture of the actual and the fictive, a report of real occurrences which have been reshaped, in different degrees, by the processes of selection, reflection, ordering, heightening, and mythologizing.

These points are obvious enough, to be sure. The problem is not so much with our responses to Thoreau as with our literary tools. It has become second nature for criticism to approach a work as a literary construct unified by a certain theme or themes to which the separate parts are subordinate, whereas what Thoreau actually wrote is a somewhat different article. It may not change our critical preferences, but it should help to clarify the expectations we bring to Thoreau, if we see his work as one outgrowth or variant of a larger development in excursion-writing during the romantic period.

By way of summarizing the conventions of the romantic ex-

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29 William Reger, “Beyond Metaphor,” *Criticism*, 12 (1970), 333–344. Reger proves his point conclusively by quoting Thoreau’s directives to would-be bean farmers: “Plant the common small white bush bean about the first of June,” etc.
cursion vis-à-vis literary Transcendentalism, the following can be said. As to method of organization, most travelogues used one of two models: the sequential, sometimes day-by-day (Tu-
dor's "A Tour," Irving's Tour, Brackenridge's Journal), or the topical (Mme de Staël's Germany, Tocqueville's Democracy in America, Emerson's English Traits). Thoreau preferred the former model in general, though he used the latter in Walden. A literary travel book was not expected to have a very coherent structure; one of its pleasures, indeed, as James Russell Lowell said in his review of Thoreau's A Week, was in its "happy fortuity." 30 A talent for observation and description was a sine qua non, but romantic travelers were expected to go beyond this and tell not simply "what has happened to them," but "how they have happened to the universe," in Thoreau's words (Wr, I, 348). This was not to be interpreted as a blank check to the imagination, however: "To write a true work of fiction even, is only to take leisure and liberty to describe some things more exactly as they are. A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry" (Wr, I, 347). As these remarks suggest, there were no special ground rules for the order in which a travel writer should proceed—that would depend on the order of observation or reflection, but there was an unspoken commitment to totality. Edward Everett, as we have seen, wanted more compendious tomes than the usual fare; one of James F. Clarke's purposes in writing about his trip was to demonstrate "how much may be seen now in Europe, in a comparatively short time"; 31 Thoreau demanded that the observer enter into a total relation with the thing observed. Emerson, even more transcendentally,


declared that true travel consists "in sounding all the stops of our instrument.

If I have had a good indignation and a good complacency with my brother, if I have had reverence & compassion, had fine weather & good luck in my fishing excursion & profound thought in my studies at home, seen a disaster well through; and wrought well in my garden, nor failed my part at a banquet, then I have travelled, though all was within the limits of a mile from my house. [JMN, VIII, 18]

This gets at the heart of what the excursion meant for Thoreau, both in life and as a literary endeavor. It was a succession of confrontations with nature, from each of which the observer is expected to extract as much as he can, the mark of success being not so much in the planning of one's itinerary or imaginative rearrangement of events as in the way in which he runs the gamut of events as they occur.

In light of all this, the question of Walden's structural and poetic integrity seems less important than it is often represented as being; and Walden as a whole seems less important relative to Thoreau's other works, which have been somewhat unjustly neglected. Even when considered as a travelogue, Walden emerges as Thoreau's masterpiece, of course, for not only does it carry the principle of significant travel as interior travel farther than any other Transcendentalist work, it is also more thorough and sophisticated on the level of observation than the rest of Thoreau's writing. Cape Cod, The Maine Woods, and A Yankee in Canada, indeed, differ from the general run of tourist accounts only in being a bit more perceptive and fluent. At the same time the generic approach reminds us that these works can bear comparison to Walden; that Walden is not in a class by itself, but a variant or extension of a form which all share loosely in common; and that Walden's present critical reputation relative to Thoreau's other books is partly a modern
accident, insofar as it derives from *Walden*'s being (1) more conducive to metaphorical interpretation and (2) more cohesive than the other travelogues with their arrangement of narrative plus digressions. The nineteenth century cared less about either virtue. Though *Walden* was even then generally conceded to be Thoreau's best work, it was not elevated to such unapproachable stature as it enjoys today. John Weiss, for example, preferred *Cape Cod* (because it was less preachy and more genial), and Edwin Morton even considered *A Week* to be a more "artistic and beautiful performance" in respect to form! Of course Morton was only a Harvard undergraduate. 32

Of all Thoreau's books, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is probably most illuminated by an understanding of the travel-writing tradition, because it presents on the surface the most perplexing mixture of subject matters and levels of style. The usual explanation for the book's apparent vagaries is Thoreau's immaturity as a writer: he had not yet found his own medium; besides, he wanted to memorialize his juvenilia and thus turned his book into something "perilously like a library of the shorter works of Henry Thoreau," as Canby wittily remarks. 33 A good deal of the apparent vagary of *A Week*, however, might better be explained as an attempt to master the tendency toward the poetic which we have remarked in the romantic excursion. Thoreau's affinities with this popular tendency should not be overstated, in view of the notorious commercial failure of the book (although the one popular magazine which reviewed it gave it a very favorable notice) 34 and the fact that several romanticist critics showed as much impatience as twentieth-century...


34 [Sarah Josepha Hale], review in *Godey's Lady's Book*, Glick, p. 4. Mrs. Hale mistook the author for Whittier, however, and may perhaps not have read as far as the free-thinking parts of "Sunday."
tury readers with its digressiveness (though much of their objection was based on dislike of Thoreau’s ideas). Nevertheless, Thoreau should not be pictured simply as an artist with a unique combination of interests trying, as yet unsuccessfully, to create in solitude a harmonious fusion of philosophy and local chronicle. He was writing in a day when pedestrian tours which juxtaposed statistics, alluring wenches, and Latin quotations were publishable in the best journals; when self-confessed pot-pourris of prairie anecdotes and descriptive sketches received good reviews; and the ex-editor of The Dial could attempt to finance her summer on the lakes by dashing off a concoction of gossip, preaching, platonic dialogue, and Indian lore, and receive favorable notice in the Christian Examiner. The problem was rather that Thoreau, being a more serious writer than Fuller and Irving and H. Tudor, carried the experiment too far in the transcendental direction, for too long, and too impiously (in “Sunday”) for his first book to make any headway against the natural indifference of a reading public which had never heard of him.

Lowell’s impatient thrust gets at the heart of the matter: “We were bid to a river-party, not to be preached at.” In the popular romantic excursions of the era there is, so to speak, a convention of levity, a tacit assumption that the prevailing atmosphere is going to be bucolic reverie or musing, which will


36 Perry Miller contends that Thoreau received from Summer on the Lakes “much of the impetus” for A Week (Margaret Fuller: American Romantic, ed. Miller [New York: Doubleday, 1963], p. 116). This is pure conjecture, however.

37 Jones rpt., p. 16.
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Not four days away from the city, I have not yet done roaming, bewildered with the summer’s breath, through the garden, smelling of all the flowers, and returning to lie upon the lawn, and bask, dreaming, in the July sun.  38

The passage is startlingly like the first canto of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”—and justly so, because that poem also takes its impulse from the same theme as the poetic excursion, the idyllic escape. (Another parallel is that Curtis’ topographical musings range freely in space and time over much of America and Europe.) Much of Whitman’s poetry could in fact be categorized also in terms of the other conventions of the romantic excursion described above.39 The difference between Whitman and Thoreau and the popular excursion, in addition to the fact that their writing is simply more difficult, is that they refuse to do no more than daydream; they must also prophesy, whereas Margaret Fuller is largely content to remain on the level of description and anecdote.40 This made Whitman and Thoreau less popular but truer to Transcendentalist ideals of art.

Now that we have looked at the Thoreauvian excursion in its nineteenth-century context, it may be worthwhile to examine

38 *Lotus-Eating: A Summer Book* (New York: Harper, 1854), pp. 11–12. This was really the sort of book Mrs. Hale thought she was recommending (see note 34, above).

39 The motif of travel in Whitman’s poetry has often been pointed out, e.g., Gay Wilson Allen, “The ‘Long Journey’ Motif,” *Walt Whitman as Man, Poet, and Legend* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), pp. 62–83. Allen and other commentators emphasize the symbolic aspects of this motif, but it is quite likely that on one level Whitman would have responded to a writer like Curtis, for his sensuous evocation of sights and scenes.

40 At the opposite extreme, Cyrus Bartol, in *Pictures of Europe*, is far more preachy than Thoreau and Whitman, but he carries it off by presenting his work quite frankly as a series of sermons on exotic texts.
A Week in detail. Relatively few readings have been attempted, and almost none which scrutinize it in its entirety—probably because it is a very hard book to hold in one's mind. The criticism which exists, furthermore, is divided rather sharply between those who see A Week primarily as a narrative with philosophical interpolations which mar its unity, and those who see it as a thematic progression with certain unassimilable elements. From the foregoing, it would seem that both these lines of thought are based on inaccurate assumptions about the genre.


43 Among those who take this view are Paul, Stein, and Bishop.
A Week has other claims on our attention here. It is Thoreau's most "transcendental" work; it is also, in an important way, the most ambitious book which the movement produced, with the exception of Theodore Parker's *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*, which attempts a comprehensive theology. In respect to scope, even *Walden* is parochial by comparison, being confined to a more limited geographical area and frame of reference, and in this sense suggesting the narrowing of Thoreau's intellectual range which reaches its conclusion in the later journal and the posthumous travelogues. Undoubtedly *A Week* is a less finished performance. But if one applies Thoreau's own touchstones of "extravagance" and "obscurity" set forth in *Walden*'s "Conclusion" (understanding these terms as Thoreau did, as terms of praise), then *A Week* compares very favorably. For it attempts nothing less than to encompass the whole of Thoreau's intellectual and spiritual development, indeed to take in the whole cultural history of mankind. This is clearly a quixotic task, but by the same token it puts *A Week* in the same category with those other great American failures, from Melville to Dreiser to Williams, which together make up so much of what is interesting in our literary history.

Finally, *A Week* seems also to suggest a certain awareness of failure, notwithstanding the general verdict that it is a "joyous" book, "a soul's voyage gaily taken on the tides of youthful hope." Despite its frequent exuberance, *A Week* has a marked elegiac quality, which increases as the days wear on. Unlike *Walden*, which ends with the renewal of spring, *A Week* begins in summer and ends in fall. Whatever somberness it may contain no doubt derives originally from its nominal "muse" or inspiration, Thoreau's dead brother; but beyond this, it displays some of the same anxieties about the natural order as a whole that we have seen in Transcendentalist catalogue rhetoric and will see again, more dramatically, in the poetry of Channing.

44 Paul, pp. 195, 194.