Literary Transcendentalism

Buell, Lawrence

Published by Cornell University Press

Buell, Lawrence.
Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47563

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1845331
8 Thoreau's A Week

Written largely during his years at Walden Pond, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* comes closer than any of Thoreau's later writing to an unguarded expression of his relationship to nature.¹ In *Walden* the speaker is obviously much more familiar with his surroundings, but he is also more detached in his presentation of them: he begins and ends in polemic and the account of his experiences is subsumed within an analytical framework throughout. Much of *A Week*, one feels, might have been taken straight from a journal, but very little of *Walden*. This helps to make *Walden* a better book, critically speaking, but it makes *A Week* a more interesting record of the Transcendentalist sensibility. Although *A Week* was of course actually written some years after the original excursion, it gives the impression of chronicling the succession of a sensitive mind's meditations in nature. From this point of view, the book's loose consecutiveness, and even the lack of close coordination between its reflective and descriptive parts, enhance its interest, to the extent that they allow the speaker's perceptions freer play. Like catalogue rhetoric, *A Week* is best understood and appreciated when read as a series of epiphanies leading from one to another by process of association, fitting here and there into larger patterns, threading back and forth precariously between the infinite and the concrete. Since these qualities are common to much Transcendentalist literature, in

¹ For previous works on *A Week*, see Chapter 7, note 41, above.
different degrees, the following chapter may serve in some measure not simply as an explication of *A Week* but also as an illustration of how the Transcendentalist sensibility unfolds over the course of a lengthy work.

"Concord River" fulfills Thoreau's apparent literary objective in the book as a whole: to immortalize the excursion by raising it, in all its detail, to the level of mythology. The chapter begins with fact and ends in myth. The Concord is a particular river with a particular ecology, but it also turns out to be the familiar river of time, which can mean "progress," "fate," or even death—it can be benign, neutral, or somber (*Wr*, I, 11), like nature herself. As emblem and as natural force, the river is also timeless. The name of the Concord has changed, and so has the civilization around it, but it "winds mindful still of sannup and of squaw" (3), as old as the Nile or Euphrates, ultimately at one with all the famous rivers of history and legend: Xanthus, Scamander, Mississippi, Ganges, Nile.

The movement of the chapter acts out this paradox of timelessness versus time. The motto, from Emerson, foreshadows it: the river is still an "Indian rivulet," but along its banks dwell the farmers, "supplanters of the tribe." Through the imagery of the first few pages, Thoreau insists on time's flow: contrasting then with now, moving from a description of the raw March wind to the white summer honeysuckle and clover (now seen no more) to a reference to haying in the marsh in winter, and ending with a provocative image of scythes cutting tufts above the ice (5). Again, a voyage upstream, if only to nearby Sudbury, is seen hyperbolically as a journey back to the primitive, to Labrador and the Northwest and heroic times of old (5–6).

But now, having implied that time can be reversed, Thoreau changes his approach at mid-chapter, by remarking that although "yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, nevertheless some flitting perspectives, and
demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are in time veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die" (7). This transition introduces the poem "The respectable folks," the first of Thoreau's doggerel interpolations. It celebrates a model lifestyle, a life according to nature which is respectable in a true and not a conventional sense. Like all the poetry in the book, as well as the prose "digressions," the passage causes an abrupt change of pace: it interrupts the prose sequence, and as poetry, it must be read more slowly, thereby creating the sense of double time, or rather of an escape from time altogether into the timeless world of meditation.

The transition was awkward; the poem is weak; but now the line of thought finds a more worthy expression. As Thoreau shifts back to prose he continues to stress the perennial qualities of the river. History, change, and motion subside as we get an overview of the Concord. Its current is gentle, almost non-existent; its course through the town seems less like a forward movement than a circling, nine times around a field verdant. Three essentially static pictures follow: a description of the surrounding landscape, the excerpts from Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence* (which do not so much contrast history with the present as reassert the marshiness of the region throughout time), and the indentification of the Concord with various famous rivers. The general effect is to set up several thematic possibilities, which will not so much direct the flow of events and thoughts as bind them loosely together ex post facto. Like the river, like the trip itself, the speaker's imagination in *A Week* moves both upstream and down, forward toward self-realization but simultaneously back into time: the biographical past, the regional past, even the cultural past, as far back as the beginnings of civilization. When Thoreau insists on these metaphors, we shall start to see the voyage not as a line but as a circle, from Concord to new Concord (almost) and back again, during the archetypal circuit of a week, which stands for all
time, and potentially for regeneration and perfection as well.\textsuperscript{2} However, the narrative will keep us from experiencing this circle as much more than a periodic reminder; primarily we will be subjected to a flux of events, each one tumbling into the next, and our problem will be to follow Thoreau's course through all its reaches and bends. In the later stages of the book, perhaps unintentionally, this impression of flux will conspire with the mood of autumn and the awareness of the circularity of the voyage to convey the same sense of fatality that one gets at the end of "Concord River," or at least the sense of drifting toward an unknown and vaguely ominous future.

"Saturday" is another sort of introduction, and as such it complements "Concord River." (As in *Walden*, the other chapters, we shall see, also occur in pairs.) In "Saturday" the movement from the mundane world to the mythical is re-enacted on the narrative level. First, the two brothers formally take leave of the town: they perform their "shore rites" (14), salute their friends with a volley of gunfire (14), and pay their respects to "the St. Ann's of Concord," Ball's Hill (19). These details initiate a movement backward in time toward an ideal, Arcadian world. The rest of the chapter, accordingly, is largely taken up with an account of the natural environment: the vegetation on the banks of the river and especially the fish that swim in it. Here Thoreau's "scientific" side comes to the fore more than anywhere else in the book, but in a casual way he also uses ichthyology for metaphorical purposes.\textsuperscript{3} The sunfish is a "jewel of the river" (26); the shiner is an infant; the pickerel is a wolf

\textsuperscript{2} See J. J. Boies, "Circular Imagery in Thoreau's Week," *College English*, 26 (1965), 350–355; and Joyce Holland, "Pattern and Meaning in Thoreau's *A Week*," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, No. 50, Suppl. 1 (1968), 48–55. They point to such other symbolic circles as the cycle of ebb and flow, the water cycle, the circular pile of stones on the bottom of the river and around campfires, and the potholes in the Merrimack.

(29); the horned pout squeaks like a minister (29). The classifications get more playful and anecdotal as they go along, culminating in the mock-tragic lament for the shad and some well-honed invective against the Billerica dam (35–37).

On a deeper level of meditation, the figure of the fisherman serves as a focal point for much of the metaphorical activity in the chapter. The narrator presents himself as a symbolic fisherman. Just as fishing is a contemplative man's recreation, so "science," he says (meaning the sort of nature lore he purveys) is "only a more contemplative man's recreation" (23). Also, travelers are fishermen: half dreamers, half adventurers in nature; and like the kind of journey these travelers have undertaken, fishermen suggest both the beginning and the end of time. Fishing was, for Thoreau, one of "the pleasures of my earliest youth" (21), as well as a livelihood and favorite pastime for Concordians of old. By the same token, fishing is also associated with age, in Thoreau's memory of the old man who practiced it as "a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles" (23). The ritualistic withdrawal, again, suggests the brothers' leavetaking, and sure enough, the "last of our townsmen whom we saw" was a fisherman (21).

The end of the chapter, with the description of pitching camp for the night, gives the impression that the departure from civilization has been completed. Though Thoreau spoke earlier about sailing into the future, it is as if they have arrived back at the beginning of time. The boat seems like "the first encroachment of commerce on this land" (39); the surrounding countryside seems "a place for fauns and satyrs" (38); and the brothers drink from the stream in primitivistic fashion "to propitiate the river gods" (38). To be sure, they also hear fire alarms in nearby Lowell and the continual barking of house dogs, but these sounds are transformed by their remoteness and by the experience of camping into things of the wilderness, just as the train in Walden sounds like the scream of a hawk.
Thoreau's A Week

The feeling of natural antiquity carries over to "Sunday" morning. The color of the dawn seems to date "from earlier than the fall of man" and still preserve "a heathenish integrity" (42). But, Thoreau adds, this aura vanishes with the dew, "and not even the most 'persevering mortal' can preserve the memory of its freshness to midday" (42). This graceful albeit hackneyed contrast of natural piety and Christian jargon points the way for the rest of the chapter. Sunday is a holy day, but the religiosity of present-day New England is played off against the sacredness of nature and the wisdom of the ancients. Both "Sunday" and "Monday" are indeed largely given over to meditations first on spiritual then on ethical life from the viewpoint of one who has withdrawn at least temporarily from the mundane into the realm of its symbolic opposites: nature, timelessness, the orient, the primitive, the sacred.

Thoreau begins by describing the "natural Sabbath" (45). The scene has an "ideal remoteness and perfection," which invites comparison with the things of man: "Why should not our whole life and its scenery be actually thus fair and distinct?" Thoreau asks (45).

The sense of disparity between the things of man and the things of nature intensifies as the boat passes the town of Billerica, which seems old not with the antiquity of nature but with decrepitude. Thoreau becomes droll and then indignant at the thought of the town fathers imposing their puritanism on the "howling wilderness" (49), as they called it, and displacing the

4 This supports Jonathan Bishop's argument that twilight in the book is "sacred," while noon is "profane." On "Monday," however, noon is sacred. Bishop's other examples of sacred-profane polarities are very suggestive and hold more generally: distance, depth, wildness, solitude, leisure are sacred; nearness, surface, cultivation, society, and labor are profane ("The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week," ELH, 33 [1966], 72–73). But Thoreau abides by no formulae; he would rather invert a conventional expectation than be consistent with his symbols. Note, for instance, the difference between his treatment of labor in "Sunday" and "Monday."
Indians even to the point of plowing up their bones. Thoreau sees and respects the settlers’ achievement but, as always, remains sentimentally attracted by “all wildness” (54). Although the era of the gardener and the era of the hunter both have their places, he sides with the hunter, as personified especially by the Indian.

This era was the age of fable, and this coincidence provides Thoreau the opportunity for a long passage in praise of fable, which he (like Emerson) sees as a model for poetry today. This is the first of a series of discussions of the nature and history of literature, which progresses more or less chronologically from the primitive to the Greek to the Roman to the “modern”; taken together, they give a sense of Thoreau’s aesthetic. For the moment, however, his interest is not in the literary but the mythological side of fable, in its diverse and universal appeal for men. The concept of myth gives him a club with which to attack institutionalized religion, as he soon proceeds to do.

What follows is an entertainingly flippant discussion of Christianity and other ancient religious traditions as comparative mythology, in both the complimentary and disparaging sense of the term. God is God, no matter what avatar you worship; the spirit must not be confined to the letter. When it comes to choosing gods, “I swear by the rood, / I’ll be slave to no God” (70)—although Pan and Buddha, Thoreau emphasizes, are more appealing to him than Christ; though again: “I like him too” (68). Thoreau’s strategy here, of course, is to shock his reader out of conventionalism, into a truer way of looking at things. Not that his purpose is purely didactic. Thoreau’s natural mode of argument, like Emerson’s, is triumph by aphorism: being insistent but antidogmatic, he prefers to affirm rather than prove or even communicate. His meditation on religion is therefore a literary tour de force as well as a sermon, just as religion itself is to him not doctrine but fable in the best sense. Nature is again used as the standard against which to judge “Christian” behavior. Christianity is too otherworldly for a
woodchopper; fishing is more fun than the New Testament. (Though the apostles were fishers too, they were "of the solemn race of sea-fishers, and never trolled for pickerel on inland streams.") Conscience itself is unnatural, only "instinct bred in the house" (75).

Thoreau ends his critique with a longish quotation from Saadi, which praises the transcendent god who towers "above the flights of conjecture, opinion, and comprehension." Fortified by this vision, he returns to the narrative and establishes a truer relation with the next person they see, the lock-keeper who lets them into the Merrimack. "With him we had a just and equal encounter of the eyes, as between two honest men" (80).

Thoreau is presently reminded that they are passing through "an old battle and hunting ground" (84); and the excitement which this inspires adds to the strongly epic quality of the long geographical description of the Merrimack which follows, paralleling the earlier, quieter account of the Concord. The Merrimack is a river of greater stature, "the only key which could unlock" the "maze" of New Hampshire's hills and valleys. Its tributaries flow past mountains which slumber "like tumuli of Titans," "by many a pastured Pelion and Ossa, where unnamed muses haunt," etc. (86). Unfortunately civilization has not enhanced the region. From end to end the Merrimack is now exploited commercially, and the only signs of the Indian are place names and the ruins of fishing weirs. The whistle of the steam engine has replaced the fishhawk's scream and the fish are "comparatively few" (90). Still, the fact that the shad and alewives keep coming back "cannot but effect our philosophy favorably"; the scenery is pastoral; the day is still "glorious" at noon (92); so without any feeling of inconsistency the travelers can rest or row with pleasant thoughts.

As they consult their "Navigator," the gazetteer, Thoreau is abruptly reminded of the subject of books in general and especially of poetry, since from the "bald natural facts" of the gazet-
teer they “extracted the pleasure of poetry” (92). The transition is lame but what he has to say is appropriate. This is his afternoon meditation, which supplements and overlaps his morning thoughts. His emphasis here is on the literary expression rather than the spiritual inspiration and its source, on secular writing rather than sacred. But in his eyes the ingredients for both are similar. The loftiest wisdom is poetic; true poetry is religious. A touchstone for both is nature. “As the oak bears an acorn, and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem” (94); the poet must be “as vigorous as a sugar-maple” (101); in Homer, Thoreau’s model for the poet as Pan is the model for his deity, “it is as if nature spoke” (94). As with the meditation on religion, Thoreau’s approach is to bring a brief assessment of ancient tradition and general principles to bear on today; and the effect of this, as before, is to negate time. The Iliad still embodies “all the sunlight that fell on Asia Minor,” and still “lies in the east of literature, as it were the earliest and latest production of the mind” (97). Some modern classics, conversely, “already seem ancient, and in some measure have lost the traces of their modern birth” (102).

Thoreau ties his discussion to the context of the journey by speaking of writing as an art of navigation, a voyage of discovery (100). The voyage should be of the same sort as the one he is undertaking at the moment: not an easy flowing or impetuous rush downstream, but a measured and deliberate effort. Sentences should be “truly labored,” he says, in a related metaphor (109). Presumably we are to remember that Thoreau is “writing” his book as “we thus worked our way up this river” (113). His defense of labor as the basis of writing is also perhaps an indirect justification for their Sabbath-breaking.

In contrast to the Thoreaus are the two befuddled travelers (one of several mirror images in the book for the brothers) who call to them from the bank. They too are bound upstream, but have been “waylaid by the Sabbath,” because they prefer to travel the “smooth way” (rather than the labored way) by com-
mmercial transportation. For them nature is "a rough and uncivil place" (115–116). Thoreau's short sketch of the history of the island on which they (unwittingly) stand implies that the brothers have the hardihood of the first permanent settler, Jonathan Tyng, while the strangers are like his hired men who ran away for fear of Indian attack. Not that the brothers themselves are immune: they nearly experience "a pilgrim's fate" in their pursuit of what seems to be a sturgeon (the emblem of the Merrimack) but is really a buoy (117); later, their sleep is interrupted, and one of them has nightmares (119).

Monday is a day of activity after a day of rest, and the opening of Thoreau's next chapter reflects this change: "When the first light dawned on the earth . . . all men, having reinforced their bodies and their souls with sleep, were invited to unattempted adventures" (121). The epic tone recurs throughout the chapter. Military language abounds. The two epigraphs from the Robin Hood ballads give the sense of adventure. The historical sections dwell upon the Indian wars. When the brothers camp for the evening, they are inspired by the sound of a drum, and they sleep to the sound of a violent wind roaring outside. All this is a fitting extension of the Monday mood they now observe at the local ferry, which seems "busy as a beaver dam" (122).

The brothers' quest, however, is at cross-purposes with such quotidian activity. The ferry ride "is only a *transjectus*, a transitory voyage, like life itself, none but the long-lived gods bound up or down the stream" (122–123). Thoreau gives notice here that he will continue the critique begun on "Sunday." His main concern in this chapter, though, is not with his countrymen's beliefs so much as with their practical morality, as befits the nature of the day. While the narrative sections play with images of activity and derring-do, the reflective passages examine the value of action as opposed to contemplation, often in terms of the contrast between Western and Eastern ethos. (The
two levels are further linked by Thoreau's sly pun, Indian-Indian [153]).

Thoreau's first topic, characteristically, is the local history of the region, which gives him the opportunity to take a few additional pot-shots at the ways of "our brave forefathers" as well as those of "their degenerate children" (124). He delights in the bathos and inaccuracy of the "Ballad of Lovewell's Fight" and so turns the affair into mock-epic, mourning more for "the crippled Indians" than for the settlers (126). At the same time, he does accept the epic approach to New England history to the extent of conceding that "we have need to be as sturdy pioneers still as Miles Standish, or Church, or Lovewell" (124).

A feeling of meditative languor now begins to qualify the speaker's mood of moral restlessness, leading him into his main theme, the contrast between the Oriental mentality as intellectual and contemplative and the western or Christian way as moralistic and activivist. "There is a struggle between the Oriental and Occidental in every nation; some who would be forever contemplating the sun, and some who are hastening toward the sunset" (147). Thoreau's attitudes toward this issue are as mixed as they are about the "sturdy pioneers." He himself is at the least an armchair reformer, who has practiced civil disobedience and admires the mood of defiance in Antigone (139–140); and he is well aware of the narcissistic side of a life of pure contemplation. His first thought as he warms to his subject is the perennial need of man and society to be reformed (128). But the thought quickly tires him, and he adds that "all laborers must have their nooning, and at this season of the day, we are all, more or less, Asiatics, and give over all work and reform" (130). This sets the tone for what follows. Thoreau makes it stay noon for the next twenty-five pages while he discusses Indian scripture, which "belongs to the noontide of the day" (156). He stands as an advocate for the Orientals, as being unjustly neglected by his contemporaries and attractive to him
personally. Their antiquity appeals to his sense of romance, their proverbs appeal to the poet in him, and their austerity appeals to his puritanismo. Perhaps most of all he is excited, just as on Sunday, at having discovered new truth in something exceedingly remote.

After the long nooning, it is hard to resume the trip. The voyagers are repeatedly sidetracked, by such diversions as a garrulous old man’s “fisherman’s tales of floating isles in bottomless ponds” (167); or a side trip to the Dunstable graveyard (176–178). In a way, the hodgepodge of geography and anecdote in this section has the effect of offsetting the meditation; in another way it is a continuation, for it stresses both the antiquity of the region and its newness to the voyagers. The charm of local history, like Hinduism and the rest of the remote past, is its exotic quality: old John Lovell lived till he was a hundred and twenty; the Indians Wars “sound incredible to us” after almost two hundred years (176); Dunstable’s “wild and antiquated graveyard” has a “heathenish” look (176).

Perhaps by sheer happenstance, this feeling of progressively greater remoteness coincides with the first appearance of what turns out to be a fairly important motif in the book, the recollection of another past excursion—in this case to the western part of the Nashua River, whose estuary they have just passed. On the simplest level, this sort of reminiscing adds an informal coloring to the narrative (“That reminds me of . . . ”); but in addition, the device reinforces the effect of double consciousness, suggesting possible analogues—or contrasts—with the voyage. The speaker remembers the Nashua excursion, for example, as something the brothers long dreamed of, like Rasselas, but hesitated to carry out, for fear that if they left their Happy Valley “thereafter no visible fairy-land would exist for us” (173). How did the trip turn out? Thoreau does not say, nor does he make any comment as to whether it is better to dream about distant lands than to try to reach them. One wonders
if the brothers will be in for the same disappointment that he foresees for the two boatsmen who passed them earlier in the day.

The chapter ends triumphantly, however. Having begun with a picture of everyday bustle, it ultimately succeeds in transcending time altogether. The eschatological imagery of the graveyard and the sunset and the drum are followed by a sudden experience of unity with the universe:

idle time ran gadding by
And left me with Eternity alone. [181]

The drum music seems to have catalyzed this transformation, and Thoreau gives the usual cosmic explanation: "Music is the sound of the universal laws promulgated" (184). The amateur drumming becomes the music of the spheres, just as the speaker recalls the telegraph wire seeming like an aeolian harp, "its message sent not by men, but by gods" (185). As in his early essay "The Service," Thoreau uses this idea of music as inspiration to reconcile the vocation of the hero or man of action with the vocation of the artist: music is the quintessence both of art and heroism, the "flower of language" and the inspiration which "brings out what of heroic lurks anywhere" (182–183). Appropriately Thoreau follows this insight with two passages of poetry expressing heroic aspiration.

Tuesday opens with a predawn meditation which recalls a hike up Mt. Greylock. As the book's most sustained reminiscence of a previous excursion, it brings to a focus the anecdote of the previous afternoon, and several more which follow. In addition, it both revives and concludes the spiritual exhilaration of Monday night. Thematically, the episode is like an extra day to the week: it takes exactly one day (from one morning to

Climbing a mountain was always a sacred act for Thoreau, and this excursion, appropriately, was a pilgrimage which led to a transcendent experience. At the summit, he was alone above the clouds, witnessing day break as if on a “new world,” “such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise” (197–198). Unfortunately, the experience does not last. Thoreau has visions for a moment of even further bliss: “As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days’ journeys I might reach the region of eternal day” (198). Instead the clouds rise (“owing, as I think, to some unworthiness in myself” [156]), and he is left in a drizzle. But undaunted, he now sets his course “for a fair lake in the southwest,” and is off on another excursion (200).

The narrative proper reduplicates this pattern, of course. The previous night he has had another mystical experience; now he is encased in fog, but he is hopeful that it will rise, as it eventually does. For the future we shall find more such alternations of illumination and dulness. The “fair lake in the southwest” also appears elsewhere, as a symbol of ideality (157); as in “Walking,” this direction has a magical appeal for Thoreau. Nevertheless, it is saddening to think that the Greylock experience is not a “real” event in A Week, but an analogue from the “past” (for although it actually took place some years later than the boat trip, it is presented as a completed action.)

6 See especially Paul, pp. 220–225, and Bishop, pp. 73–76. Both these accounts rightly see the excursion as the spiritual high point of the book, a model of Thoreau’s quest for the sacred, but they need to take into account all the implications of the fact that the passage is only an anecdote.

ing past, it is no longer accessible except to the imagination. It is ironic that the moment of intensest ecstasy does not take place during the week itself. This fact, plus the attitude toward the past maintained by Thoreau and Transcendentalism generally, keeps the experience from assuming the same authority in *A Week* as, say, the ascent of Mount Snowdon has in *The Prelude*. The theme of the growth of man's mind is alien to Transcendentalism; Transcendentalism recognizes, so to speak, no continuity between past and present; and once the experience of ecstasy is past there is no knowing whether it can be recovered.

References to the past, in any case, continue as the boat proceeds upstream. "Tuesday" is indeed that chapter of *A Week* most steeped in the past, both because of the amount of personal reminiscence, and because the landscape continues to be described in terms of remoteness and antiquity. The brothers pass springs along the river banks, "fountains of innocence and youth" "along life's stream" (203). The country is "wild and solitary" (247); the farms have a medieval look, as if "the few inhabitants were retainers to a lord, and a feudal state of things prevailed" (205). Thoreau sees traces of Indians and, as always, is reminded of numerous anecdotes about the early settlement of the area.

But his most beautifully provocative passage on the relationship between past, present, and future is inspired by the subject of commerce, of all things. "Being now fairly in the stream of this week's commerce" (220), Thoreau reflects on the life of the boatman, which he finds pleasant, carefree, healthful, even romantic. He recalls his excitement as a boy at seeing the "fabulous river-men" come into Concord (222-224) from far-away places, or so he thought. "Such is Commerce," he concludes, expansively: "Who can help being affected at the thought of the very fine and slight, but positive relation, in which the savage inhabitants of some remote isle stand to the
mysterious white mariner, the child of the sun?” (224). Here Thoreau is simultaneously the savage welcoming the boatsmen and the mariner, himself a boatsman bound up the exotic Merrimack. As such, he is acting out his boyish dreams. He may not see girls in grass skirts, but he does espy “some shagbark trees, which, as they do not grow in Concord, were as strange a sight to us as the palms would be, whose fruit only we have seen” (227). Thoreau’s praise of commerce is thus as much a way of romanticizing his adventure as is his comparison of life at Walden to an “enterprise.” Unfortunately, in the present case he is also aware of the sequel: “Since our voyage . . . there is now but little boating on the Merrimack. . . . Now nothing is carried up the stream” (225). This will be the last voyage. Thoreau has only the stock Transcendentalist consolation, that there is “no need to travel . . . so similar are the lives of men in all countries” (227).

In addition to the idea of questing, commerce suggests relationships between people; and that is a no less important concern in “Tuesday” and A Week. It is relevant that Thoreau’s hike up Greylock is a solitary climb, and the anecdote conveys a strong sense of isolation from (and superiority to) other people. The local inhabitants try to persuade Thoreau to climb by the conventional trail, but he takes “the shorter and more adventurous way” (191). At the top, “my only companions were the mice” (196) and he has his morning vision all to himself. Though it is anticlimactic to descend, he can take some satisfaction in proceeding “by my own route” and finding that for the rest of the world “it had been a cloudy and drizzling day wholly” (200).

The chapter’s next reminiscence of a past excursion is more directly concerned with relationships. Passing a native who seems humane under an “uncivil” surface, Thoreau is prompted to thoughts on the distinction between “civil and uncivil,” which in turn lead to the recollection of a hike along a tributary of the Connecticut, where in an area just as remote as this
he spent the night with a farmer who was "rude as a fabled satyr" (217), but eventually betrayed "a gleam of true hospitality and ancient civility" (218). (Though only after Thoreau offered to pay him in advance—a detail which is glossed over.)

This anecdote about hospitality suggests the general direction in which Thoreau's mind is moving. Up until this chapter he has established an almost unbroken impression of the brothers' willed isolation from other people. Now, without exactly reversing himself, he seems more interested in defining further his relationship with mankind. In the warmth of his feeling about boatmen, he finds it "pleasant to hail these sailors of the Merrimack from time to time, and learn the news which circulated with them" (226). He speaks almost approvingly of the "quiet agricultural and pastoral people" that live in these parts (226). One gets the feeling, altogether, that the countryside has become wild enough to make civility something of a relief. Disembarking at a lonely spot, they are pleased to find wild apple trees. "These gentler trees," says Thoreau, "imparted a half-civilized and twilight aspect to the otherwise barbarian land" (246). As in "Ktaadn," Thoreau did not like his nature too unharnessed. Some of the less successful touches in this chapter might also be put in this context: for example, his meditation on the "tragedy" of the deaths of animals (236–237), partly inspired by the brothers' having killed squirrels and then been unable to eat them, is an attempt to humanize nature; and his anecdote of the friendly seventeenth-century Indian petitioning the governor to protect him against bad Indians suggests Thoreau's own inability to fit comfortably into the role of noble savage.⁸

If we visualize "Tuesday" as recurringly preoccupied with the subject of human relationships, we may begin to see some point to the prominent and seemingly intrusive noon-time

⁸ Cf. Bishop's argument that Thoreau's inhibitions about savagery in nature are related to his mixed feelings about God and the savagery of Indians, in that both seem simultaneously to be desired and vaguely feared as threatening (pp. 84–88).
passage on Anacreon. This would seem to be a prime example of a passage which was stuck in simply because Thoreau happened to have written an essay on the subject, and very possibly this was the case. Nevertheless, the essay is quite pertinent to Thoreau's interests in this chapter and the next. Just as A Week itself is an oblique commemoration of John Thoreau, so the poems here translated are love poems, frequently couched in natural imagery: swallows, vines, doves, snakes, horses, bees, even fishes. No matter that the love in Anacreon is amorous rather than fraternal; the tantalizing balance between nearness and distance, longing and content, binds them both. (Perhaps this is why Thoreau insists that the lyrics "are not gross, as has been presumed, but always elevated above the sensual" [240]). Also significant, maybe, is that Thoreau invokes Anacreon in person, as a "minstrel." This is to be a convivial occasion, a sociable rather than mystical nooning. Thoreau begins by complimenting the ancients in general as the most "refined society" imaginable—though he attributes the pleasure of their company to the fact that "we can converse with these bodiless fames without reserve or personality" (238). It comes as no surprise, then, to find that the brothers wish to pitch their camp in complete seclusion, "on a large rock in the middle of the stream" (248).

This proves impractical, and the next morning, ironically, they find that they have made their camp in a pathway. "This was the only time that we were observed on our campground" (249). This remark plus the chapter's epigraph ("Man is man's foe and destiny") point to the main concern of "Wednesday," friendship. This chapter, and particularly the thoughts on friendship, I take to be the thematic climax of the book, the ultimate object of Thoreau's literary quest.\(^9\) It takes him quite

\(^9\) The essay on "Friendship" was evidently one of the last parts of A Week to be written. This might suggest that it was no more than an afterthought. But it is also possible that the essay was designed as a capstone.
awhile here to build up momentum, for not only must he report what he has seen, he continues to be preoccupied with the subjects of questing-in-nature and the significance of the past. These subjects, however, eventually turn out to be ways of leading up to his main theme; for the kind of friendship which matters to him (as well as the particular friendship which he seeks to memorialize) is adequately described only in terms of remoteness of time and place, and the nature of that friendship is the same as the nature of nature.

Thoreau begins, accordingly, by meandering through a series of observations which revive the impression of him as searching rather restlessly for some indefinite goal. They pass the smaller bittern, "the genius of the shore" who seems to be trying to wrest "the whole of her secret from Nature," or to be looking "forward to some second advent of which he has no assurance" (250). Somewhat reluctantly, Thoreau identifies with the bird: "We, too, were but dwellers on the shore"; their quest, too, amounts to no more than the pursuit of "the wrecks of snails and cockles" (255) in a minor stream. But he resigns himself to making the most of this small-time quest—a typical Thoreau gesture. "The smallest stream is a mediterranean sea" (253); the ocean can be "deeper known" by standing on the beach and seeing what it casts up than by sailing on its surface (255); the locksmen's houses are more interesting than "palaces or castles"; life here has the serenity of Arcadia and the Orient (256–257). Not that he intends to settle down and participate in the life of the local community. Generally, the brothers resist the temptation to land on the "low, inviting shore" (252). The image of a New England Arcadia gives way before a tribute to islands as little self-contained continents, as if to shrink from the tie to society.

Having withdrawn in space, Thoreau now withdraws in time. Turning to his gazetteer, he is inspired to another passage of historical geography (consisting mainly of a disquisition on potholes in the river), and this leads him to the book's most de-
Thoreau's A Week

finitive statement on the antiquity of the region. No matter if America lacks the ruins of the old world, says Thoreau, with seriocomic grandeur, "Our own country furnishes antiquities as ancient and durable, and as useful, as any: rocks at least as well covered with lichens, and a soil which, if it is virgin, is but virgin mould, the very dust of nature" (265). In keeping with his goal of art as nature, Thoreau tentatively includes his book in the list of natural antiquities. Also included are a series of local worthies, white and Indian both. All are dead, but Thoreau asks, "Who is most dead,—a hero by whose monument you stand, or his descendants of whom you have never heard?"

Thus Thoreau travels a devious but characteristic intellectual circuit during the first twenty or so pages of the chapter. He begins by drawing archetypal images out of his surroundings, which at first attract him to them but then become standards against which his environment is judged; he secedes from it to bask in thoughts of the eternal, the primitive, the antique, but finding these qualities in the local environment he returns to it with a somewhat more abstract, selective affection. The same ambivalences underlie what he soon has to say about friendship.

The main points of Thoreau's idea of friendship are quite simple and explicit. True friendship is a relation between souls, in which material considerations and petty prejudices have no place. Friends should make the highest demands upon each other and themselves, conceiving their relationship as a means of attaining a spiritual level above their normal state. "Let our intercourse be wholly above ourselves, and draw us up to it" (289). This extreme high-mindedness resembles Emer-

10 This pattern may be seen in a great many other places in the book, of course. Essentially it is the familiar Thoreau movement from concrete to abstract back to concrete, but with a couple of specific features: the paradoxes of society versus solitude, withdrawal from the present in time and space versus acceptance of the present, and satirical versus affirmative tone.
son’s, except that Thoreau goes even further in his emphasis on a certain tension or rivalry at the heart of friendship.

Let such pure hate still underprop
Our love, that we may be
Each other’s conscience,
And have our sympathy
Mainly from thence. [305]

One’s best critic (either by rebuke or example) is one’s best friend. Whereas Emerson is self-deprecating in his essay on “Friendship,” speaking as one conscious of his inadequacies, Thoreau is pugnacious. So few friendships are worthy of the name; are you worthy? Such is the tone throughout. It is not just that Thoreau is wary of mixing with strangers. Even true friendship “is a miracle which requires constant proof” (289). His disdain, however, seems to mask a greater longing for friendship than that of Emerson, who treats friendship as a luxury which he has resigned himself that he will never possess. Thoreau is not yet so blasé. He has known the pain of loss, and the pain of misunderstanding (“It is impossible to say all that we think, even to our truest Friend” [300]), but still he clings to the vision of an ideal human relationship.

To the extent that Thoreau’s essay is built around this aspiration, it partakes of the same questing atmosphere as the rest of the book. “The Friend is some fair floating isle of palms eluding the mariner in Pacific seas,” or like “The Atlantides,” to which many voyage but none have seen (278). Again, the search for the friend is like standing on a promontory waiting for the ship to come in, with the ocean all the while roaring “Of wrecks upon a distant shore, / And the ventures of past years” (279). On a more personal level, as this couplet implies, these thoughts are a voyage back in time to a particular friendship. The ideal friend “is not of some other race or family of men, but flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. He is my real brother” (302).
The quest for friendship, like the book as a whole, has both an elegiac and a hopeful quality. Thoreau regrets the loss of the “gentle boy” who might have been his friend, but trusts that “If I but love that virtue which he is,” they shall still be “truest acquaintances” (276, 277). Though in one sense there is no such thing as an ideal friend, the experience of friendship abides forever, even beyond the grave, “as surely as . . . the manifold influences of nature survive during the term of our natural life” (303). Nature is Thoreau’s main analogue for friendship, as for all other subjects. Friends are “cis-Alpine”; acquaintances are “beyond the mountains.” The theory of friendship is to the real thing as “botany to flowers” (303). And Thoreau’s conclusions about both are the same: man’s relation to the Friend is as constant, and as fleeting, as his relationship to nature.

The rest of the chapter bears out this paradox, as well as the friendship/nature analogy. At the close of the meditation, ominously, the first thing the brothers do is separate, one going ashore and the other remaining aboard (307). The canal-boaters whom they outraced catch up and act hostile; they meet a gentle boy who wants to join them, but his father refuses to let him (308). At the chapter’s end, however, Thoreau has a dream in which the memory of an old quarrel with a friend is somehow eased, so that the day ends affirmatively. More important, his evening thoughts are full of assurance and peace, like Monday night’s. Thoreau seeks to affirm the sublimity and transforming power of “the inward morning” despite full awareness of the fleetingness of such moments. Our “summer life” is as transient as mist, but by the same token we may at times float “high above the fields with it” (314).

The marked self-consciousness of Thoreau’s exuberance here makes his evening meditation a proper culmination to his thoughts on friendship. Like the latter, the passage is mainly theoretical: on the nature of sublime visions, a surrogate for the real thing rather than the thing itself (in which respect it is a marked comedown from Monday night and even Tuesday
The sense of ecstasy as a transcendence of insuperable obstacles is also a carryover from the discussion of friendship. Finally, it is right for Thoreau to move from the issue of friendship to the issue of the sublime experience, for that is the chief benefit of friendship in his view. The promise of friendship is: we shall be as gods.

Wednesday evening is beautiful; Thursday morning it rains. One feels a general sense of decline, not only in the week and the weather but also in the quest. "This was the limit of our voyage" (318); they go farther on foot, but in a way that doesn’t count, since the boat trip is over. They do not climb the hill which "affords the best view of the river," evidently because the bad weather would obscure the view (321). Finally they reach the end of their walking trip, Mt. Agiocochook, where the Merrimack has its source, only to be reminded of the stanza from Herbert’s "Vertue," which ends:

The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,
For thou must die. [335]

Allen Hovey points out that the Indians considered Agiocochook as the abode of the Great Spirit and regarded it with superstitious dread. Perhaps this is the reason why, in retrospect, Thoreau chose to emphasize not the triumph of having climbed it but the fate in store for those who had.

It also seems relevant that the writers Thoreau discusses in "Thursday," Persius and Goethe, are inferior by his standards to the ones he has praised earlier, just as Anacreon was inferior to Homer. "There is a sad descent" from the Greeks to Persius (327); Thoreau values only "some twenty lines" (330) and has harsh things to say about his genre. Goethe is a "city boy," a consummate artist who "lacks the unconsciousness of the poet" (349, 348). Like all the Transcendentalists, Thoreau was both drawn to and repelled by Goethe’s cosmopolitanism.

11 The Hidden Thoreau (Beirut, 1966), pp. 76–78.
"Go where he will, the wise man is at home. . . ."—the chapter's epigraph (317)—suggests feelings toward the quest both of consummation and resignation. The relation to nature is the sum of wisdom, but the wise man is not a purposeful quester so much as a spiritual vagrant. Indeed a later passage which echoes the epigraph seems a positive renunciation of questing: "Go where we will on the surface of things," says Thoreau, "men have been there before us" (323). He goes on to point toward the next stage of existence (in which he himself happens now to be living).

The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man fronts a fact, though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and it. Let him build a log-house with the bark on where he is, fronting it, and wage there an Old French war for seven or seventy years, with Indians and Rangers, or whatever else may come between him and the reality, and save his scalp if he can. [323-324]

For those who know Walden, these words are a declaration that Thoreau is now ready to "front the essential facts of life" in a more genuine manner than this book will show. A Week has been his grand tour; now he has found that "continued traveling is far from productive" (326) and he is ready for a profounder excursion on a more limited geographical scale. He has seasoned into the mature albeit unglamorous woodsman described in the epigraph, which comes, of course, from Emerson's "Woodnotes," for which Thoreau was rumored to be the model. It is pleasant to suppose that one reason this turning point takes place on Thursday is that Thursday is the day of Thor, with whom Thoreau liked to link his own name etymologically.

In any case, the hiking trip is described very hastily, often in generalized terms: "Sometimes we lodged at an inn. . . . There we sometimes read." (326); "Suns rose and set" (333), etc. The only detail on which Thoreau dwelling is the upland encounter
with the young soldier, whose greenness is perhaps an image of Thoreau's own past. In general, he seems in a hurry to get back to the boat—partly for structural rather than thematic reasons, of course. But in addition, he seems to intend a certain personal parallel to the horrific tale of Hannah Dunstan's escape from the Indians. The brothers too decamp on Thursday morning from "the very spot" which a tribe of Indians occupied awhile ago (318); they now ply the same downstream route at the same time of day ("probably") as Hannah (341), not terrified as she but also heading home away from wilderness. The connection is obliquely reinforced by another passage which moves from a sense of the remoteness to a sense of the presentness of the Indian wars and the ancient past (345-347), and by a comparison of the art of composition to the act of scalping—Hannah's act (351).

Throughout the book Thoreau has scattered foreshadowings of fall. Thursday night is "the turning-point in the season" (356). The brothers go to bed in summer and awake in autumn, and the autumnal mood dominates "Friday," the last, downstream chapter of A Week. The water looks grayer; the wind has picked up; the cottages on shore look "more snug and comfortable"; the leaves have begun to turn; Thoreau begins to ruminate about Concord's annual cattle show. The crowd of farmers there sounds like the rustling of autumn leaves. Thoreau gives his image of the autumn festival a timeless dimension by comparing it to "the ancient festivals, games, and processions of the Greeks and Etruscans" (359-360). The overall effect of the reference, however, is to accelerate the flow of time, for the cattle show is not due to take place until later in the fall. Some of Thoreau's other descriptions also look forward to October and November, making the change of seasons seem more abrupt than it really is. The principal historical allusion is to the great flood of October, 1785 (380). This deepens the elegiac note in the chapter. Summer, the trip upstream, seems like a previous
existence: “The places where we had stopped or spent the night in our way up the river, had already acquired a slight historical interest for us” (376). As they pass the tributaries of the Merrimack they wonder if they will ever see them again. Things seem to be hastening to their end, though with some promise of another incarnation, as in Channing’s poem to autumn quoted by Thoreau:

So fast we hasten to decay,
Yet through our nights glows many a star,
That still shall claim its sunny day. [378]

The fast pace of the downstream journey quickens the tempo, too; at one point the boat almost seems to be flying (385).

The tempo briefly shifts when they reach the Concord and once more have to row upstream; the day is warmer now and it seems as if summer has returned (391). But Thoreau continues to float “in imagination farther down the stream of time” (391). The mild weather and slow progress set up a dreamy mood, which he now identifies with autumn and senescence, in contrast to the morning briskness, which now seems to recall an earlier and more vigorous era. The towns they pass, compared to those upriver, have an antiquated look, and Thoreau is reminded of “poets of a milder period than had engaged us in the morning” (391). In the morning he had meditated on “the stern and desolate poetry of Ossian”; now his thoughts turn to Chaucer, who is something of a comedown: indoorsy, unheroic, witty rather than inspired.12 In contrast to primitive poetry, Thoreau says, “our summer of English poetry . . . seems well advanced toward its fall” (391). He goes on, however, to exempt Chaucer

12 Ossian, in his own way, also suggests the declension of the season, being a more “wintry” poet than Homer (Wr, I, 366). This detail, however, is less important than the functions of the Ossian passage (plus the remarks on inspiration which precede it) as a contrast to the state of the arts today and as a warm-up for the statements of aspiration for the ideal life which occur later in the chapter.
from a good deal of this censure. Chaucer may be decadent compared to Ossian, but he is youthful in contrast to us. His "innocence," "serenity," "love of Nature," and "reverence" are all "childlike," just as historically he is "the child of the English muse" (398). "In many respects," then, Chaucer is "the Homer of the English poets," "so natural and cheerful, compared with later poets, that we might almost regard him as a personification of spring" (393). But this praise, in turn, gives way to a passage of more complex tone, which describes the characteristics of a work of genius by disparaging the comparatively superficial poetry and criticism of the present day (400–403).

As his journey nears its end, Thoreau begins to have intimations of immortality. "In the hues of October sunsets, we see the portals to other mansions than those which we occupy" (403). These are not conventional heavens, however; they are "not far off geographically" (403). The kind of immortality he envisions, "the true harvest of the year," is rather an immortality within nature, gained when one's life has become totally "naturalized" (405). "Here or nowhere is our heaven" (405). It consists of "a purely sensuous life"—meaning not a life purely according to the five senses, but a life according to the "pure senses"; for "our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become." Our ears, for instance, must be able to hear "celestial sounds" (408). Thoreau looks to "the immaterial starry system, of which the [material universe] is but the outward and visible type" (412). The way to this discovery is not through disembodied meditation but "to educate and develop these divine germs called the senses" (408).

This new world remains to be discovered. The voyage about to be completed is merely a symbol and preparative. Underlying Thoreau's affirmations here is a certain sense of frustration, evidenced in his repeated calls to discover the brave new world, and two interpolated poems in which the speaker identifies with the fading autumnal sun (404) and a transitory bouquet of flowers (410–411), respectively. In function, these poems
suggest the little lyric in "The Ponds" chapter of *Walden*, where the speaker also identifies his soul with nature. In each case, the poetic identification supplies a kind of climax for Thoreau's thoughts on the man-nature relation. But in *A Week* the identification brings as much pain as pleasure, ending in an anticipation of death. The sun says:

```
The winter is lurking within my moods,
And the rustling of the withered leaf
Is the constant music of my grief. [404]
```

The bouquet in "Sic Vita" is consoled somewhat, however, by the thought that the flower bed will thrive from having been thinned (just as Thoreau is careful to follow the first poem with a more optimistic prose passage).

By the time Thoreau has finished his meditation on immortality, the sun is setting and the boat is almost back in Concord. The book ends, or almost ends, with a succession of redundantly emblematic sunset images (416–418), and then the famous passage on silence. It is both a triumph and a defeat.\(^\text{13}\) Silence is celebrated, as a soothing and welcome refuge, and as "Truth's speaking-trumpet, the sole oracle" (419). But it is also an enigma which one cannot interpret. It is a vast unfathomable sea (the end of every life-river-journey). It is a challenge which men perpetually fail to meet; even after six thousand years it "is little better than a sealed book" (420). The sense of the whole passage boils down to something like this: praised be silence, the rest is silence.

Although in one chapter it is impossible to fathom the intricacies of a 400-page book, the foregoing analysis has at least tried to give a sense of the rich and often beautiful play of

\(^{13}\) For a quite different interpretation of this passage, see W. B. Stein, "Thoreau's *A Week* and *Om Cosmography*," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, No 11 (1971), 36. In my view, Stein ultimately imposes the analogy of yoga too heavily on Thoreau, but his two articles on *A Week* are significant as the most ambitious attempts ever made to view Thoreau in terms of Oriental thought.
sensibility manifested in *A Week*. Thoreau's excursion does not have the kind of formal cohesiveness which modern readers have been trained to expect, but it does have a sinuous continuity, reminiscent of those lengthy Chinese scroll paintings entitled "Mountains and Rivers without End." The images are isolated and often abrupt, eccentrically spaced apart by sky and clouds. The artist seems to have been inconsistently selective: here we see a person sketched in a few strokes and a few trees made to represent a whole wooded hillside, while the contours of a particular hill or gnarled tree are outlined with an almost surrealist attention to detail. Still, the work does have a definable movement, and the parts relate. In the case of *A Week*, the main movements are: first, the withdrawal into nature, which has its emotional culmination on Monday night and Tuesday morning and continues until Thursday; second, the counterpoint theme of the relation of self and others, which emerges on Tuesday and especially Wednesday; and third, the theme of declension (both historical and seasonal), which begins as early as Sunday and takes over the book on Thursday. If this reading of the book's flow is accepted, all the chapters can be seen as loosely knit units, and most of the major meditations are functional.

In addition to the structure just described, we have found certain recurring motifs, some of which scholarship has already identified, some not. Minor configurations include circular imagery, confrontation with pairs of people, recollections of other past excursions, and special nuances surrounding the time of day: the morning and/or afternoon meditation, the languor of noon, the serenity of evening. Of greater importance are the various ways in which Thoreau manipulates the sense of time. He experiments with pace, making time stand still in one spot (Monday), speeding it up in another (Thursday, Friday). He interweaves several different types of history: the personal, the regional, the cultural, the mythic, and handles them in a number of characteristic ways. He may emphasize the presentness or the remoteness of the past, the transitoriness or the eternity of
the present, the superiority or the inferiority of tradition to today—all of which strategies are used, however, with a view to praising and preserving what is infinite in the particular fact, whether it be Homer, the Indian wars, or the smaller bittern. On the other hand, this sense of the infinite is not allowed to dominate the book, except at intervals. Thoreau presents rather a succession of guesses or graspings at the transcendent. For each excursion or sortie into meditation and nature there is an inevitable return, which amounts to a defeat as well as the completion of a cycle. Although time is continually being suspended or slowed down during the course of *A Week*, the narrator makes no lasting headway against time, for it is the course of time and events which ultimately determines the continuity of both the voyage and the book.

This fact, in turn, reminds us that the way the shaping imagination works in *A Week* is not primarily to pursue and interweave a set of motifs but to seize upon each image or idea as it comes along and develop it for what it will yield, then let it go by. Although *A Week* is indeed rich in patterns, it is still basically a book about Ball's Hill, the Merrimack dam, the sunfish, the Dunstable graveyard, Homer, Hinduism, mountain-climbing, Hannah Dunstan, phony bardic poetry, thoughts on music and silence, and a thousand other things which Thoreau spins together with spider-like filaments. The unity of Thoreau's literary universe consists not in the smoothness with which these lead into one another but in the analogical relations which he is able to draw out of them.

Still farther on we scrambled up the rocky channel of a brook, which had long served nature for a sluice there, leaping like it from rock to rock through tangled woods, at the bottom of a ravine, which grew darker and darker, and more and more hoarse the murmurs of the stream, until we reached the ruins of a mill, where now the ivy grew, and the trout glanced through the crumbling flume; and there we imagined what had been the dreams and speculations of some early settler. But the waning day compelled
us to embark once more, and redeem this wasted time with long and vigorous sweeps over the rippling stream. [246–247]

This comes near the end of "Tuesday" as the last part of a passage describing a brief foray on land. By any normal standard of literary economy, it should be excised; it has no (direct) bearing on the book's "main action"; but who would want to see it cut? It is a beautiful piece of description and justifies itself as such. That is one's first response, probably also the basic cause of its inclusion. But then the analogizing perception sets in. The side-excursion has a microscopic quality: the trip up a mini-river towards what is more remote, wild, ancient; the attempt to empathize with the original pioneer; and of course the re-embarkation—one does not stay permanently in these parts. The old-fashioned religious rhetoric, "redeem this wasted time," gives a provocative coloring to the whole quest: it is done partly out of a sense of duty, it seems; these puritans have to put in their time before they can get to the saints' everlasting rest.

Such resonances as these, possible extensions of the particular, are the heart of the book. Like the Silence, they are complex beyond telling, and they seem to vanish in a cloud when one stands at a remove from the books and looks for skeletal form. But if one enjoys nuance and tone and is willing to read A Week part by part, he may do so in the assurance that the parts do add up to something, even if it does happen to be the Indefinable. In any case, the quality of endless suggestiveness is a much better literary embodiment of the "purely sensuous life" to which the speaker of the book aspires than the qualities of precision or cohesiveness. Despite its recurring immaturities both in style and philosophy, A Week is indeed the most manysidedly sensitive public account of the soul's encounter with the Not-me which the Transcendentalist movement produced.