

“AS LONG AS SHE CRACKS SHE HOLDS”:

THOREAU’S ANTICIPATION OF DYING

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation is the first full-length study to address Thoreau’s ideas about death and dying. Death, for Thoreau, was an unnatural state, while dying was part of the cyclical course of nature. As he moves through nature’s slow time, Thoreau is able to anticipate dying. Thoreau’s transcendentalist use of time makes anticipating the seasons, and all changes in nature, a form of prophecy in the traditional sense, in that while the prophet is speaking, what he is prophesying is already happening in the eternal present. Anticipation itself becomes a form of prophecy, and ultimately what is anticipated is dying. In this sense, Thoreau is always prophesying dying while he experiences the living cycles of nature.

From his earliest writing, Thoreau expressed interest in dying. This interest was accelerated by the early death of his beloved older brother. This experience eventually led to his first book, in which he solidified a life-long exploration into the meaning of dying.

Dying in Thoreau can be separated into three narratives: the sentimental, the heroic, and the physical/mystical. The sentimental narrative is informed by antebellum popular culture, which Thoreau then applies to his nature studies. Nature also enacts a heroic narrative, influenced by the Carlylian and transcendental understanding of the hero, which culminates in both the human hero, John Brown, and the heroic dying of seeds. The physical/mystical

comprises two avatars—the transition states between living and dying, and the peculiar “life” of inanimate matter and the kinship Thoreau forms with matter.

In his own dying, Thoreau brought together all three narratives. His long process of dying from consumption brought him into the tender ministrations of the women of his family and the people of Concord generally, as Thoreau joined them in the traditional ritual of dying. By refusing all opiates, and maintaining his cheerfulness and industry throughout the eighteen-month ordeal, he showed he was master of both stoicism and heroism. The long-drawn out nature of his dying showed him the liminality of his own living, how interconnected living and dying were in his frail body, and a sense of himself slowly becoming inanimate matter.

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Especially, "To My Dear and Loving Husband" John Eiche:
"If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife were happy in a man,
Compare with me ye women if you can;"

And finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Joseph S. Raden—I kept my promise, Pop.

**“As Long as She Cracks She Holds”:
Thoreau’s Anticipation of Dying**

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“As Long As She Cracks She Holds”: Thoreau’s Anticipation of Dying

When I entered, Thoreau was looking deathly weak and pale. I saw my way for but the fewest words. I said, as I took his hand, “I suppose this is the best you can do now.” He smiled and nodded, and gasped a faint assent. “The outworks,” I said, “seem almost ready to give way.” Then a smile shone on his pale face, and with an effort he said, “Yes,--but as long as she cracks she holds.”

-Parker Pillsbury

Introduction: Anticipation as Prophecy

[A man] need not mature as quickly as an apple tree or an oak.
Shall he turn his spring into summer?
-Henry David Thoreau

I

Nature is always dying; Henry Thoreau knew this and spent his entire life saying good-bye. Of course nature is also always living, but in one of what I like to call Thoreau's beautiful paradoxes, dying is the truest form of living. Though ostensibly about death and dying in Thoreau, this is a dissertation about a particular transition, or more specifically, that non-temporal, non-spatial existence between two states that is not one or the other. For Thoreau, that state existed primarily in the *process* of dying. Dying is continual, and integral to creation, which is ongoing. To be dead, whether that death is a human death or a human-generated death—is to step out of the innocent cycles of nature, whereas to be dying, “truly dying” as he says in *Walden*, whether you are a human, an animal, a tree, a lake, or a flame, is to be continually participating in nature.

One cannot fairly call Thoreau “death obsessed” in a culture that was so deeply invested in death and dying (especially dying well). Instead, I intend to show how he combined his culture's fascination with dying, his transcendental fascination with, and rejection of, human time (or what he would call “railroad time”), his own horror at the physicality of death and his lifelong disgust for graves and stone monuments, his mysticism, and, finally, his mindful

attention to nature, which gives dying its apotheosis as the ultimate transition state. For him, death was associated with vile putrefaction, meaningless and costly stone monuments, and wasted lives which never began. One may be struck in his late political essay “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” by his many references to the inability of those who haven’t truly lived to be able to die—if there is no living in the true sense there can be no dying in the natural sense. Yet this sentiment didn’t come to him late. In the earliest draft of the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*, he writes of his neighbors, the farmers, “Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?” (326). The peck of dirt a man must eat is the dirt that covers his grave; in beginning to dig his grave as soon as he is born the farmer is emphasizing that he is not ever a living man but an animated corpse, putrefying years before his actual death. And even earlier than his first draft of *Walden*, just two months after his brother’s death, he wrote in his Journal, March 12, 1842:

To die is not to *begin* to die—and *continue*—it is not a state of continuance but of transientness—but to live is a condition of continuance and does not mean to be born merely—There is no continuance of death—it is a transient phenomenon—Nature presents nothing in a state of death (PJ 1: 372).

Dying, as part of living, always exists. In his memory and his flute playing and, most especially, in his writing, his brother is always living. Heartbreakingly, he is also always dying. The silly word “closure” was used for doors and boxes and not mourning in the nineteenth century. Therefore, though being dead was something grotesque, dying was an aspect of the Romantic sublime for Thoreau—powerful and not completely knowable—and formed a core of his mysticism. This was why he experienced during his own dying the kind of ecstasy he so often did in nature as a young man, and continued to experience with less frequency but still

powerfully as a middle-aged man. In dying—even though he was out of the woods and in his mother’s parlor—he experienced that ecstasy *because* it was a purely natural state.

This most significant truth, the idea that everything that exists lives in a state of transition, Thoreau shared with his fellow transcendentalists. This holds true for both action and thought (though they would have seen no real divide between the two since they believed thought was the highest form of action). Therefore, for Thoreau, dying too was a transitional action. Nature is always dying—that is part of being fully alive. The fuss that people make to stay alive takes them out of nature and makes them more dead.

A year after Thoreau’s death, while Emerson was reading his friend’s complete Journal (he had never seen anything like the entire two million words with which Thoreau filled it when he was alive) he wrote in his own, “In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes it a step beyond, & illustrates by excellent images that which I would have conveyed in a sleepy generality.”¹ This famous passage has been famously misinterpreted these many years, to both Emerson and Thoreau’s detriment. What often comes to the careless reader’s mind is: “‘Self-Reliance’—Emerson wrote about it; Thoreau lived it!” However, Emerson’s admiration has little to do with the one-room house Thoreau built beside Walden Pond (in a woodlot Emerson himself owned) or the rest of Thoreau’s simple, self-sufficient physical life. The passage in fact has nothing to do with how Thoreau lived: it is about Thoreau’s writing and thinking, which are as extravagant as his physical life was simple, pure, and abstemious.

The most important idea, for this dissertation, that Thoreau takes from “Self-Reliance” and the rest of Emerson’s oeuvre is that idea of transition. I believe the passage that must have resonated most deeply for Thoreau was, “Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in

the moment of repose; it resides in the moment of *transition* from a past state to a new state [emphasis added].”²

Everything Thoreau wrote in one way or another refers to this idea of transition. In *Walden* he writes, “In any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time...to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment.”³ However, the present never exists in perceivable time in the sense that it is already passing away even as it presents itself. Therefore, to live in what has often been called the “eternal present” necessarily means that one has stepped aside from linear time into where he can actually perceive it by experiencing it prospectively: eternity. Thoreau subtly points this out by his choice of preposition—saying of the present time that he stands “on” it rather than “in” it, therefore making the present spatial. Just as in a painting, a moment in time can only be recreated and represented. By observing this eternal present in nature, Thoreau sees that all life forms are constantly dying and being born—in this sense there is no future or past either, just the ongoing eternity of the present moment. The actual cessation of life therefore, is nearly impossible to experience: it is an instantaneous eternity that exists between living and dying.

Like Thoreau, Emerson returns again and again to transition states, most beautifully, I think, in his essay, “Experience.” In one paragraph he says twice, “Everything good is on the highway.”⁴ A “highway” in Emerson’s time was no interstate—it was simply a public road, often a toll road. Of course, Emerson’s “highway” doesn’t exist in any real sense, but as part of the ideality that is one of the themes of the essay. Obviously, an imaginary road is preferable for travel. One does not have to imagine a destination, one just processes along in the eternal moment.

If Emerson's highway of the mind is one of his "sleepy generalities," then Thoreau "takes it a step beyond & illustrates with excellent images" in his lecture/essay "Walking" an actual, physical road that, like Emerson's highway, goes nowhere and everywhere. Less than halfway into the essay Thoreau inserts a seemingly comic poem, "The Old Marlborough Road." He introduces it "because I presume there are one or two such roads in every town." The poem takes up nearly two pages, and its narrow but not completely straight lines assume the shape of a road in the blank, marble-looking margins surrounding it:

THE OLD MARLBOROUGH ROAD

Where they once dug for money,
But never found any;
Where sometimes Martial Miles
Singly files,
And Elijah Wood,
I fear for no good:
No other man,
Save Elisha Dugan,--
O man of wild habits,
Partridges and rabbits,
Who hast no cares
Only to set snares,
Who liv'st alone,
Close to the bone,
And where life is sweetest
Constantly eateth.
When the spring stirs my blood
With the instinct to travel,
I can get enough gravel
On the Old Marlborough Road.
No one repairs it,
For nobody wears it;
It's a living way,
As the Christians say.
.....
Great guide-boards of stone,
But travellers none;
Cenotaphs of towns
Named on their crowns

.....
They're a great endeavor
To be something forever;
Blank tablets of stone,
Where a traveller might groan,
And in one sentence
Grave all that is known;
Which another might read,
In his extreme need.

.....
If with fancy unfurled
You leave your abode,
You may go round the world
By the Old Marlborough Road..⁵

In this poem one finds in brief so much of Thoreau. He begins with his contempt for burgeoning antebellum capitalism when he tells us the road was abandoned because it was no longer making money. He may also be punning on the fact that there was once unsuccessful treasure hunting in the Concord/Marlborough area. Later in the poem, we find out the reason for this: “Cenotaphs of towns” must be the stone guideposts of towns that have built newer, more efficient roads. (Of course a cenotaph is a stone monument built in remembrance of someone not buried there—like Walden Woods’ former inhabitants the lost people of these lost roads leave little by which they can be remembered). Consequently, the road represents a return to the primitive, as Thoreau illustrates by sparsely peopling it, including with a border character: Elisha Dugan, an African-American (though the poem only identifies him as a hunter and says nothing of his race), who, like the Canadian wood chopper in *Walden*, is constantly trapping and eating small animals—constantly living as his furry victims are constantly dying. Of course it’s funny that “Where life is sweetest/He constantly eateth,” but Dugan is also reminiscent of Thoreau himself at Walden. He too lived alone, and metaphorically, at least, desired to “suck all the marrow out of life.” He juxtaposes Elijah Wood, a successful Concord landowner and boot

manufacturer, with Elisha Dugan (notice the first names—the greatest Old Testament prophet and his successor), putting them on the same level.⁶ No one would be much interested in writing an account of Dugan: Thoreau not only does so, but he mythologizes him, as he does the vanished and vanishing fishermen in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, those long-dead former inhabitants of Walden Woods, the Irishmen who built the railroad, the loggers and Indian guides in *The Maine Woods*, the wreckers and lighthouse keepers in *Cape Cod*, and of course, his own solitary self.

In addition to Elijah and Elisha, the poem is full of Christian allusions. “When the spring stirs my blood/With the instinct to travel” is a re-wording of the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, which he quotes at the beginning of the essay. This is in keeping with the entire essay, since he characterizes his daily walk as both a holy quest and a pilgrimage. After saying no one—at least no one of account by village standards—uses the old road, he says, “It’s a living way/As the Christians say.” This is the poem’s most difficult couplet. In order to understand it, we must recall his distaste of stone monuments, especially graves, which line the old road. (“Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive.”)⁷ How can the road be “a living way” if it is mostly deserted and lined with tombstones whose names and dates, like the long dead, are vanishing away? The dead at least can be recreated in imagination as living or dying, but crumbling tombstones have no relation to the once-living and are a profanation of that living. On the other hand, “the living way,” or simply “The Way” of Christianity, can come under the rubric of constant transition. “The Way” of an older Christianity, the Congregationalism of the transcendentalists’ grandparents (and several of Thoreau’s aggressively living aunts) was a constant movement toward perfection, much like Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. This tradition accepted that perfection could only be achieved

through dying out of this life into a holier one where our sins fall from our backs and we are reunited with God. For Thoreau, process can lead us toward a prelapsarian reunification with nature. However, the basis of antebellum New England Unitarianism was that human perfectibility was achievable in this life through rational virtue, which for Thoreau led to self-satisfaction and lives devoted to commerce and status which progressed only to meaninglessness, quiet desperation, and blank tombstones.

After reading the poem we begin to understand why he justified its inclusion by saying he presumed “there were one or two such roads in every town.” The railroad which brought Thoreau to the town lyceum where he is delivering his lecture is changing the landscape of New England. Something, however, is lost when the old roads are abandoned for the more efficient railroad. Layers of loss cover the landscape and what Thoreau and his listeners remember from their childhoods will soon vanish altogether. But does that mean they cease to exist? This begs the question, are we related to the dead past and if so, how? Thoreau is also appealing to the “one or two” listeners or readers who may still follow the old abandoned roads with their feet and their minds. The concluding lines, “You may go round the world/By the old Marlborough Road,” heighten the sense of circularity of the entire essay and much of his work and that circularity is the dying that embraces all living.

This Thoreauvian circularity is now part of just one approach to Thoreau studies, rather than a holistic view of his life and work. Many scholars talk about “the three Thoreaus”: the naturalist/proto-ecologist Thoreau; the political/abolitionist Thoreau; and Thoreau the great prose stylist and philosopher.⁸ Thoreau the naturalist—what he was to his earliest readers—has been having a renaissance this last decade and more with the creation of “The Green Thoreau.” Several significant books come to mind on this new reading of the oldest Thoreau, but two of the

most important are Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* and Laura Dassow Walls' *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*.⁹ David S. Reynolds does a very detailed reading of the abolitionist Thoreau in his recent *John Brown, Abolitionist*,¹⁰ encouraging us to take another look at Thoreau's political writings for their valence in the twenty-first century. Ever since Sherman Paul's *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration*,¹¹ written now more than fifty years ago, innumerable books—many of them excellent—have been written about Thoreau's prose and philosophy, and, particularly in recent years, about his extraordinary Journal. I too would like to propose a triune Thoreau, but rather than answer the question, "What is the principle aim of Thoreau's writing?" I would like to propose three approaches Thoreau had to dying: the sentimental or domestic, the heroic, and the transformation from living forms to inanimate matter as well as the "life" of that inanimate matter, which I will sometimes refer to as simply "physical/mystical."

My approach will be primarily thematic, as I do not believe Thoreau's ideas about dying changed particularly, though he found new ways to express them as he developed as a writer. There is a temporal aspect to the dissertation as well, as it will be bookended by two biographical chapters: the first on the death of Thoreau's beloved brother John, and the last on his own death twenty years later. In between will be three chapters, each devoted to the three approaches named above. The bookend chapters will not be strictly biographical, since in the first I will analyze the composition and the text of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and Thoreau's relation with his brother and reaction to his dying. The final chapter won't be strictly biographical either, as I will analyze Thoreau's own dying as an actual text, in addition to discussing his last letters and the four essays he prepared for posthumous publication in the

Atlantic, and books and essays written about him by people who had known him, most especially, Emerson's still controversial "Thoreau." The three middle chapters, though mainly analytical, will of course also discuss aspects of Thoreau's life and personal sensibilities, especially in discussing his Journal. Separating his three approaches is a necessary rhetorical device, but one must remember, that there was great fluidity between the three approaches, both in Thoreau's writing and thinking, and in the intellectual and popular culture of the time.

For example, a theme holding the three approaches together is that of the seed, about which Thoreau has much to say, from his very earliest Journal to the end of his life. Sentimentally, plants, like the tender mothers of the nineteenth century imagination, die so their children, their seeds, may live. The seed travels heroically, by wind or animal beak, cheek, or gullet, to wherever it is dropped, where it stoically rots, feeds the animals, or grows into a new life for another generation, while the fruits and leaves, with the same stoicism joyfully and beautifully lay down their lives for the sake of the soil. As Thoreau says in a number of places, he has "faith in a seed." "Faith" implies mystery, an unknown quality believed in. A seed is itself, and not itself, for an acorn holds, as Emerson says, an entire oak forest.¹² When does an acorn cease being an acorn and become a tree? Must the acorn die for the oak to be born? In this sense, tender nurturance leads to stoic denial of self, and from there to transformation—transition from one state to another.

In a passage I will discuss again, Thoreau says, in "Spring": "[I]t was pleasant to compare the first tender signs of the infant year just peeping forth with the stately beauty of the withered vegetation which had withstood the winter,—life-everlasting, goldenrods, pinweeds, and graceful wild grasses, more obvious and interesting frequently than in summer even, as if their beauty was not ripe until then... We are accustomed to hear this king [winter] described as a rude and

boisterous tyrant; but with the gentleness of a lover he adorns the tresses of Summer” (569). Winter as a gentle old king, lover-like, adorning the hair of summer while dying is a sentimental image. The fact that this lover is a king implies a courageous, heroic life, the chastity of that life’s ending further enhancing the heroism of that dying. But winter in the form of the fading grasses is both dying and living simultaneously (notice the first plant he mentions is life-everlasting): somewhere between animate plant life and vegetable mould, the grass partakes of both. Is the grass really dead or are just these particular culms of the living plant dying? When does the grass make the transition from living plant to the mystical existence of the inanimate? The grass it seems is at once always living and always dying in the unknowable present moment that contains the seeds of all the seasons.

Though there are many instances of this overlapping, the dissertation will principally break down the chapters as follows: Chapter One, discusses briefly the history of consumption, or tuberculosis, in New England, especially in the Thoreau and Emerson families. It also analyzes what is known and speculate on what is not known about the brothers’ relationship, including their dual courtship of Ellen Sewall, as well as the possible tension and guilt Thoreau may have felt in leaving his own home for the Emerson home. This leads to the bulk of the chapter, a close reading of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in terms of prophetic anticipation and universal dying in nature.

Chapter Two concentrates primarily on Thoreau’s domestic relationship to the natural world in *Walden* and his Journal. It also focuses on the letters Thoreau exchanged both with his own family and the Emerson family. The chapter begins by discussing the most recent contemporary criticism on men and sentimental culture, and the questioning of the long-held belief in “separate spheres,” which, in fact, were not so separate after all. Thoreau may have

grumbled that the local library's most popular book was *The Wide, Wide World*, but there are striking similarities between Thoreau and his sentimental contemporaries, particularly Stowe, with whom he shared the dual concerns of abolition and the preservation of the New England woods. The chapter returns to the Christian orientation of some of his writing and speculates on what or if he imagined heaven to be. It talks about his strong attachment to and mourning of boyhood and how that informs so much of his work, as well as his evolving relationship to his own family, from whom, as a youth he couldn't bear to part, then spent the early part of his adulthood trying to escape, and finally returned to with a heightened sense of loyalty that he clung to for the last twelve years of his life. The chapter also discusses his bachelor state in a society that looked askance at unmarried men, and how those who knew him best seemed to do whatever they could to aid him in maintaining his chaste life.

Chapter Three discusses Thoreau's heroic approach to dying. The primary focus of this chapter will be his John Brown essays and his late natural history essays, particularly "The Succession of Forest Trees." The chapter begins with an assessment of the meaning of heroism to Thoreau and the other transcendentalists. It tracks the confluence of dying well both sentimentally and heroically, and discusses Thoreau's early literary exposure to heroic dying, chastity, and virtue through his study of Carlyle's *Cromwell* and Thoreau's own early essay on Sir Walter Raleigh. It goes on to talk about his deep affinity for the classical authors and his admiration of the Native Americans.

Unlike his evolving feelings for the pacifist abolitionists of the 1830s and 1840s, Thoreau never became disillusioned with John Brown; rather, he became disillusioned with the ultimate response of his state and his country to Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. In Brown, Thoreau found the answer to his own heroic quest: the man whose deeds would speak to the brave and virtuous

hearts of men, and by example, these men would grow “like corn in the night.” Once again, however, Thoreau’s country broke his heart.

At the time of Brown’s rise, Thoreau had been working several years on the projects tentatively called *The Succession of Trees* and *Notes on Fruit*. An important essay he’d been revising for a while was “Autumnal Tints.” Many critics have pointed out that in speaking of both the autumn leaves and of Brown and his men Thoreau says, “They teach us to die.” Indeed, there is a remarkable similarity in the language of “Autumnal Tints” and the Brown essays. Thoreau impurples the ground with the dying leaves and suggests the blood of heroes in their easy acceptance of the natural cycle of dying. He does this again with Brown, and then waits: from the moldering leavers come new trees, new seeds planted to grow tall and heroic, and produce, autumn after autumn, brave leaves that cheerfully lay down their lives so that others may grow in their stead. But when Brown and his men are planted in the ground no new crop of heroes sprouts up—there is still slavery in Massachusetts and an ugly materialist world all around Thoreau. And so, just as abruptly as he drops Brown as a topic, he picks up where he left off and moves from leaves to seeds. David Reynolds proposes that the transcendentalists’ embrace of Brown brought about an earlier Civil War and this may be so, but it also gave birth to “*The Succession of Forest Trees*.”

Chapter Four applies Thoreau’s always heightened sense of the mystical to the transition between living and dying. This chapter refers to his *Journal* and *Walden*, but will be principally an examination of one of his two posthumous book length works, *The Maine Woods*. The chapter is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the transition between living and dying, and the second, a consideration of the life of inanimate matter.

The fifth and final chapter talks about Thoreau deliberately constructing both his self-image and his legacy out of his own dying. This was an effort on his part which came as naturally to him as his journalizing did. In the sentimental vein, he knew how one died well. He allowed his rough persona to soften under the ministrations of his family and friends. Heroically (Emerson would say stoically) he refused all opiates with his usual sense of purity and worked heroically revising and preparing books and essays for posthumous publication. Mystically, his dying gave him that chance finally to live in a kind of frozen present, suspended many months in what must have felt like a timeless instant of transition. All three of these approaches to his own dying reflect both his last writings and revisions and how he was memorialized and read for more than a century and—according to this dissertation—into the second decade of the twenty-first century. This last chapter, as in a sense the whole dissertation, attempts to see not as a final aphorism, but as the true key to understanding Thoreau, just what he meant by, “one world at a time.”

II

I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried:
I hoped in thy word.
Mine eyes prevent the night watches,
That I might meditate in thy word.
-Psalm 119: 147-150 (King James translation)

The title of this Introduction is “Anticipation as Prophecy” and my intention is to explain what these words meant to Thoreau in general but particularly in relation to dying. An older definition of “anticipation” that Thoreau understood is the sense the OED defines as “the action of representing to oneself or realizing a thing before it occurs.” For anticipation to encompass prophecy we must remember that “realize” had a different connotation in the nineteenth century

than it does in the twenty-first: to realize a thing or idea was to have it become real in one's mind.¹³ One could know something without realizing it—to realize it one had to be able to create a picture of it in the mind, imagine it, understand it. Also in the nineteenth century as opposed to the twenty-first, prophecy was understood differently because people knew the Bible intimately in a way very few people do now. In its current usage, prophecy is predicting the future, but according to the first (though labeled obsolete) definition in the OED, prophecy is “the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God; divinely inspired utterance or discourse; the gift of this divine inspiration itself.” Most frequently, the Old Testament prophets gave commands to the people which God was already in the process of putting into action, or which had been in action before the prophet began his utterance. For example, when Ezekiel tells the dry bones to re-form themselves, grow sinews, and begin to breathe, that breathe, in the form of a wind from God—the same wind or breathe that began the Creation—is already spinning through them.¹⁴ Eighteen centuries later, even as the concept of time was changing from the fluid sense it had had for millennia to the modern, linear sense we know now, the Romantics grasped the prophetic relation between the prophet/poet, the natural world, and the miraculous by commanding the winds to blow, the birds to call, and the waves to thunder.

Thoreau constantly incorporated prophecy in the Biblical sense into his anticipation of natural phenomena. One example is the “Housewarming” chapter in *Walden*. Late fall is turning to winter and Henry has built his fireplace and just completed plastering his house. “At length, winter set in in good earnest, just as I had finished plastering, and the wind began to howl around the house as if it had not had permission to do so until then” (520). He most famously does this, however, at the beginning of the book when he says, “To anticipate not the sunrise or the dawn merely but Nature herself!” (336) This passage is less obscure if one juxtaposes it with the two

verses of Psalm 119 with which I began this section: “I prevented the dawning of morning and cried: I hoped in thy word/Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.” A close look reveals that both passages have time backwards. The Psalmist begins with morning and follows with the previous long night that preceded that morning and Thoreau puts sunrise before the dawn. Though Hebrew was not one of the languages Thoreau read, he knew the Bible very well and was also well versed enough in early modern poetry to pick up the obsolete nuances of the King James translation. Robert Alter writes, “The Hebrew verb, *quidem*, here [verse 146] and verse 148 can equally mean ‘to anticipate,’ ‘to go before.’ Hence the King James version renders it as ‘prevent,’ using the English verb with precisely the same meaning, which is now obsolete. [Both verses] present us, in reverse chronological order, the picture of a supplicant who spends the whole night in a prayer vigil that lasts till daybreak.”¹⁵ Again, the rhetorical strategy in both passages is similar. The supplicant is holding back the dawn to emphasize the fullness, the circularity of his vigil; Thoreau gets the jump on the day’s circularity by speeding past dawn to sunrise. Ultimately the supplicant anticipates God’s deliverance; Thoreau anticipates “Nature herself.”

Though the intention of God’s deliverance in the Hebrew original meant a lengthening of temporal life, the Christian interpretation Thoreau grew up with visualized a post-dying deliverance through God’s Son, associated rhetorically with the sun itself. Thoreau’s sunrise is another deliverance. His circularity cycles more quickly through dawn, sunrise—and presumably—morning, forenoon, noon, afternoon, sunset, dusk, twilight, and night, then dawn again, faster than nature herself. The speed of human time as opposed to the eternity of natural time suggests a movement toward dying. Death itself may exist outside of nature, but the very idea of dying is nature hyper-stimulated, moving through her cycles in some, if not graspable, then mappable

way for the young surveyor at the pond. The supplicant in the psalm will gain his redemption either by holding back death a while longer or by embracing the gift it offers—Thoreau, in anticipating nature, will embrace it by the dying that turns the natural world.

This interpretation supports the famously obscure passage which precedes it: “I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtledove, and am still on their trail.” The reader can bang her brains over this passage or choose to concentrate on its temporal emphasis: what does he mean by “long ago”? The obvious connotation is a lifetime but as he has told us, the Henry who lives at the pond is barely thirty. Since “many travellers...seemed as anxious to discover them as if they had lost them themselves,” then his loss is a universal human loss. The animals themselves are so enigmatic that most critics agree they are symbols of loss that offer open-ended, personal interpretation. Therefore, “long ago” makes this loss about a fall from the eternal into the temporal. “Long ago” is the indefinable eternity of natural time that humans can only anticipate by dying out of it. However, one can also look at “long ago” conversely: it can also be vast but recordable human time—“fellow travellers” are generation upon generation who have suffered the same temporal loss. They may catch glimpses or hear whisps of animal sounds, but this is only the anticipation of Nature herself, a speeded up circularity which places human temporality within the eternal present of natural time, a way of briefly holding back the dawn by speeding ahead of it and looking back.

In addition to the Bible, Thoreau was well-versed in the old Puritan writings if for no other reason than they were where he continually returned to learn about southeastern Massachusetts at first contact: the Indians, the land and animals, and the lives and livelihoods of the first English settlers. So he knew these ancestors of his mother’s family very well.¹⁶ Like most of his neighbors he knew that the first Puritans to put steeples on their meeting houses in

the late seventeenth century were queasy about topping them with an iconographic cross and chose instead a simple weather vane. The first steeple weather vane in Concord was in fact a very simple five-sided brass arrow, but the most common was a rooster on a double perch which pointed out the four directions. For several centuries now common knowledge has been that the cock on top of the church served as a reminder and warning of Peter's three denials of Christ the night before the crucifixion. I believe this conclusion was reached in error, and the iconography of Peter was attached later, when Puritanism had softened into eighteenth century Congregationalism. If these people felt uncomfortable with religious symbolism to the extent that a simple wooden cross offended them, then putting a symbol of Peter's denial on top of their steeples would be the equivalent of stained glass windows. The weathervane cock topping the meetinghouses I am sure meant the same to the earlier generations as the identical cocks on top of their barns: the very Thoreauvian "wake up early, be alert, labor at your vocation." But as time went by, and people became more comfortable with religious symbolism, they were able to attach it at will. The weathervane cock as a reminder of Peter was the most common explanation, but not the only one.

At the other end of Peter's denial was the rooster's triumphant symbolism: the resurrection. From the early eighteenth through the early nineteenth century families of the deceased entertained their townsmen after funerals, as their income allowed, often with small hard cakes served with and ale or cider. These cakes, either prepared by the household, the minister or sexton's wife, or, in the cities, bake shops, were made in molds impressed with various designs, among them the crowing rooster. A mold dating from 1785, found in a bakeshop, "Depict[ed] an elaborately carved rooster, a symbol of resurrection and a popular motif on early American Funeral Biscuits."¹⁷

Thoreau would have been aware of both these symbolic interpretations, and used them both. He brings them together in a famous passage from “Life without Principle”: “You come from attending the funeral of mankind to attend to a natural phenomenon. A little thought is sexton to all the world” (357-8). In *Walden’s* “Conclusion” Thoreau says, “I don’t suppose I have obtained to obscurity,” in his book and perhaps in his experiment. Yet he says, “[I]n this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man’s writings admit of more than one interpretation.” Once again he is reminding us that all scriptures admit of many interpretations. The passage must be taken apart carefully to get all the kernel it contains. First: “A little thought.” Does he mean a little thinking or one single original thought? To Thoreau, both would be equally difficult to his obtuse townsmen. But “sexton”? This is the man who both digs the graves and rings the church bell. Does this original thinking or one original thought wake mankind from its own funeral? Or does the unacceptable mode of thought complete the funeral with a burial? Could it be both depending on how one interprets it? In another of his beautiful paradoxes, after he famously says, “If a man does not keep pace with his companions perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer,” he says, “It is not important he mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer?” (581-582). Yet this is exactly what men must do. How quickly a man matures, or if he matures at all, can never happen in the slow natural rhythm of living and dying in the countless rounds of seasons a venerable tree knows. A man’s seasons are finite.

As winter ends in “Spring” he tells us the pond is already reflecting to his mortal eyes a summer sky, and he imagines the first robin song of summer. As a human being he cannot help but turn his spring into summer; this is both the gift and tragedy of his human consciousness. As he turns to that summer and speaks of how “[T]he seasons went rolling on into summer, as one

rambles into higher and higher grass,” he switches to an abrupt coda in a last short paragraph to the chapter: “I finally left Walden September 6, 1847”—autumn—and he has turned his spring into fall (576).

III

Walden as a Memento Mori Text

For the sake of my argument about dying in nature being Thoreau’s entrée into anticipation as prophecy, I will offer a *memento mori* reading of *Walden* in this Introduction. I don’t mean for this reading to supersede other readings of the book, which deliberately offers itself to multifarious interpretations, or even that this will be the only way I will look at *Walden* in the rest of the dissertation. But for the sake of my argument, I will look at some key incidents and passages, beginning at the end. In his “Conclusion” (which I like to think of as “after Walden,” though he freely admits much of the book was written after he left the Pond—still the Conclusion is a coming to terms with what his experiment meant, several years after it ended), he writes, “I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (580). At first glance this appears a joyous and triumphant statement, triggered primarily by the word “success.” And there is triumph in this sentence, but what reads more overpoweringly is heartbreak. The man who at the beginning of his experiment planned to “brag as lustily as chanticleer” says he has learned the following “at least,” which opens the suggestion that he didn’t learn much more. And the second clause is even more heartbreaking: if we advance in the direction of our dreams we may meet with an unexpected success—he explicitly does not say our dreams will come true. And the success that we do meet with will not be one we recognize in common hours—that is, most of the time. Only in special,

isolated moments of thought and inspiration, will we be able to recognize something precious gained in our broken dreams.

This passage recalls an earlier one, in “The Bean-Field,” about moral and spiritual failure, framed as experience:

This further experience I also gained. I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seed, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil...and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops. Alas! I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they *were* the seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten, or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. (453)

Thoreau tells us he plants a smaller crop his second summer at the Pond to have more time for other pursuits and we know he was there only two summers. So this passage is obviously not about husbandry. “Sincerity, truth, simplicity, and innocence” he tells us from the outset are virtues he possesses in embryo form, which he takes to the Pond to cultivate. But it seems in the carrying, his seeds have died before reaching the soil. These are virtues he also hopes to inculcate in his readers and neighbors but if they fail to germinate in him, how can he seed them in those around him? In his common hours he must face up to both the death of dreams and the death of virtues.

However, I don’t believe one can stop in a critical assessment of dying merely as loss without also seeing it, tragic as it is, a signal for renewal. Dying was on his mind when he went to the Pond in 1845 to write a first draft of his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, his elegy to his dead brother, but his sense of renewal in this first book was equally

strong. In the more than two years he spent there, and the additional seven he spent finishing *Walden*, the book became, much more so than *A Week*, which was written to honor a brother already a number of years dead, a story of the process of dying. He begins his story in March, at the end of winter, describing the beginnings of spring in the breaking up of the ice, the melting of the snow, and the return of some of the songbirds. As his year comes round, however, the second winter takes on a new importance, becomes an avatar of himself, and in that sense, the hero of the book. Spring, celebrated in all its beauty and promise, is also the slow, brave dying of winter. He says early in the “Spring” chapter “One attraction of coming to the woods to live was that I should have leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in.” This he does have, a kind of spectatorship to spring, but also an isolation from it.

The consecutive late winter/early springs that begin and end *Walden* do share an evocatively sad character—a lost goose. A few weeks into his leisurely house building he says, “On the first of April it rained and melted the ice, and in the early part of the day, which was very foggy, I heard a stray goose groping about over the pond and cackling as if lost, or like the spirit of the fog” (355). In the second chapter, Thoreau makes one of his startlingly paradoxical statements: he is describing his house with seeming pleasure and pride, how in the early months, before it was plastered and served merely as shelter from the rain, being inside the house was the same as being outdoors. “[It had] a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew... To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character.” But just a few lines farther down, he says, “The Harivansa says, ‘An abode without birds is like meat without seasoning.’ Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them” (390).¹⁸ The fact that he can describe his wild and free house (an oxymoron by his own

admission) as a “cage” is deliberately startling to the reader; looking even more closely at the passage, one is also surprised at his choice of Harivansa quotation—one that associates birds with “meat.” Jumping ahead to “Spring,” we are reminded again of this strange reference to his house as a kind of human bird cage, one from which he watches, rather than experiences, the arrival of spring:

Suddenly, an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at hand, and the clouds of winter overhung it...I looked out the window, and lo! Where yesterday was cold, gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope as on a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening in its bosom, though none was visible overhead...As it grew darker, I was startled by the *honking* of geese flying low over the woods, like weary travellers...indulging at last in unrestrained complaint and *mutual consolation* [emphasis added]. Standing at my door I could hear the rush of their wings; when driving toward my house, they suddenly spied my light, and with hushed clamor wheeled and settled on the pond. So I came in and shut the door, and passed my first spring night in the woods (571).

The influx of natural light brings spring to the pond, but the fire- and lantern-light from his cabin frightens the wild birds. The paradox is that in going inside and closing the door for the sake of the geese, he in fact doesn't pass his first spring night in the woods—he spends his first spring night caged among but away from the birds as he told us many chapters ago. The geese's “mutual consolation” emphasizes his solitude and though he has told us many times how much he loves to be alone, it seems he suffers solitude for want of the right society, which is exactly what the geese have. Shortly after this passage another lost goose makes an appearance, aural if not visual: “For a week I heard the circling groping clangor of some solitary goose in the foggy

mornings, seeking its companion,¹⁹ and still peopling the woods with a larger life than they could sustain” (572). Like Thoreau, this goose must suffer solitude because his expectations of society so far exceed what is available that he will always be denied “mutual consolation.”

Walden has several birds that readers have always associated with Thoreau himself. Most famously, there’s the Merlin hawk. In distinct contrast to the goose, “It appeared to have no companion in the universe,—sporting there alone, and to need none but the morning and the ether with which it played. It was not lonely, but made all the earth lonely beneath it” (574). The Merlin is the bird Thoreau most wants to see as the triumph of his solitary self, and it is, but not always. The other bird is the loon from “Brute Neighbors.” In an apparent battle with his own divided self, Thoreau keeps trying to second guess where this diving bird will next surface. The loon always wins, but then—Thoreau-like—gives himself away with his laughter. The loon is finally able to win this game by default, “calling on the god of loons” for rain, but this will not always work for him, as the dead loons shot by the hunters illustrate. But no critic I know of has seen the tragic identification between Thoreau and the goose that bookends his year: lost, cut off from companion and kind, and bound to die.

As Thoreau prepared the second edition of *Walden* in early 1862 while was dying, he changed the title from *Walden, or a Life in the Woods* to simply *Walden*. This change is a nut many critics have tried their teeth on. He says in “Spring” he left because he had “many other lives to live” but his Journal and future writings never wander too far from the site of his former home. Perhaps the “life” of his Walden experiment was one more way of living in the world his experiences created. That life was a dying life in the most natural sense because no one individual life—human, plant, or animal—endures very long in natural time. Instead, by

changing to a spatial title rather than a temporal one, Thoreau allows his one life at the pond, like the vanishing dent of his cellar hole, to step into the universal cycle of natural dying.

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 511.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983)

3 Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre, 337 (New York: Library of America, 1985)

4 *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. "Experience."480.

5 Henry David Thoreau. "Walking," in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: The Library of America, 2001) 231-233

6 My thanks to Robert Gross for filling me in on the biographies of Martial Miles, Elijah Wood and Elisha Dugan.

7 *A Week*, et al. 368.

8 The best delineation of these three avatars of Thoreau the writer is by Alan Hodder, who says that the three Thoreaus were created first by the market, and then by the act of canonization when the study of American literature became part of university curricula. Thoreau's immediate survivors promoted him as the gentle nature writer in order to preserve and increase his burgeoning literary reputation. To this end, for example, his old friend Harrison Blake was the first to publish his Journal, which he did in seasonal excerpts: *Early Spring; Summer; Autumn; and Winter*. Toward the end of the nineteenth century British Socialists lammed onto Thoreau as a brother and the political Thoreau was born. This Thoreau quickly traveled the world including his own country and was famously adopted by Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. With the publication of E.O. Mattheson's *American Renaissance* in 1941, Thoreau's reputation among the New Critics and beyond as a brilliant composer of prose was established. Hodder does not go on to talk about the resurrection of the first Thoreau, the proto-ecologist, but this is not in the purview of his book, which is about Thoreau as a spiritual and religious writer. See: Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

9 Buell, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1995); Walls, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press) 1995.

10 David S. Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Right*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

11 Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1958)

12 Emerson. *Essays and Lectures*. 237.

13 The most famous example of this usage is the story of the aging and heavy set Elizabeth Peabody walking into a tree and falling on her back, cushioned by her voluminous skirts and thoughts and therefore unhurt. While her nieces and nephews were hauling her to her feet they asked her why she hadn't seen the tree. "I saw it," she is supposed to have said, "But I had not realized it."

14 "Before Newton and Galileo, ancient cultures thought of time as organic, subjective, cyclical, and part of nature. Only in the nineteenth century did science and industry teach society to think of time as a matter of fixed precision. The railroads were being established and it was important for people to be at the station on time." Krista Tippett,

Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—And How to Talk about It (New York: Penguin, 2008) 103.

15 Robert Alter, trans., *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Norton, 2008). 431-432N

16 The Thoreaus did not arrive from Jersey until the decades just preceding the Revolution.

17 William Woys Weaver, *America Eats: Forms of Edible Folk Art* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers: 1989)108.

18 Caged song birds were not uncommon pets, specifically for women, in the antebellum period. Boys often captured wild songbirds to sell in the towns. As both the pet industry and the eastern forests became more developed, imported tropical birds became more popular. See: Katherine C. Grier, *Pets in America: A History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) Though I seriously doubt outdoorswomen and naturalists like Mrs. Thoreau or either of Henry's sisters would have kept caged birds, they were assuredly common in the town. Ellen Emerson had a canary and her mother Lidian had a parrot that on at least one occasion caused nearly as much pandemonium as the parrot in *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

19 Normally, one would assume a solitary goose would be searching for its mate, but it is a testament to the wonderful care of Thoreau's prose, that this solitary is seeking his "companion"—the friend Thoreau is ever disappointed in finding.

Chapter One: Figure in the Mist: The Death of John Thoreau Jr.

Verily, the Thoreaus as a family, knew how to die as bravely as they lived.
-Annie Russell Marble

I

Thoreau was always an elegiac writer, and he honed that talent for remembering the dead—both dead persons and dead times—in the pages of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, his elegy to his lost brother John Thoreau Jr. This leaning toward the elegiac was inspired by Thoreau's early and ongoing relationship to dying, both in his family and in nature. The Emerson and Thoreau families both suffered from poor health and early deaths, and Thoreau was early and continually confronted with loss. The most painful of these many losses was the death of his older brother, John, to whom he had been tremendously close. Yet despite their closeness, Thoreau, in his early twenties, moved away from his own family and aligned himself with the Emerson family, living first in Emerson's home, then in Emerson's brother William's home on Staten Island, then on Emerson's woodlot on Walden Pond, then again in the Emerson home in Concord. A strong possibility exists that Thoreau may have felt some guilt in leaving his family, particularly his brother, for the Emersons, especially since John was stricken with his final illness when his younger brother was living at the Emersons.

A close reading of *A Week* reveals a young writer growing into his solitary adulthood by taking stock of his personal losses and the losses of time and history. The loss of the beloved brother becomes a metaphor for all losses, and nature becomes both the repository of loss and the only fact one can turn to for both a realization and a release from loss. The week of the long-ago pleasure excursion and the week of the narrative come together to form a monument to the past,

a monument not in stone, which Thoreau would have rejected, but a monument in words. Thoreau takes his journey of remembrance to redeem the past and keep it always in the inexplicable present moment that can only be remembered and anticipated.

John Thoreau Jr. never saw the railroad come to Concord. In that sense, he remained to his brother Henry, until his own death twenty years later, a figure from out the mystical, immutable, and innocent past. Unlike his friend Emerson, who not only visited the graves but opened the coffins of his beloved first wife and his first son and namesake, Thoreau never, not even in a letter or in the shortest Journal entry, mentions the grave of his brother. Instead, he saw his brother's monument in memory, in two constantly moving (albeit one very slowly) and therefore never-the-same rivers, and, ultimately, in the leaves of a book.

January 1842 was a horrible month for the Emerson and Thoreau families. On New Year's Day, John Jr., the oldest Thoreau son and Henry Thoreau's dearest companion, cut his finger while stropping his razor. Even during a time when little was known about infection, the cut was a trifling one, and John wrapped it in a cloth and did not worry about it. However, in a little more than a week, he discovered the skin was "mortified," and the next day he began to suffer from lockjaw. The doctors, even one called from Boston, could do nothing. His was an agonizing and horrifying death. Yet, according to Robert Richardson, "John accepted the fact that he was going to die calmly and with fortitude that was both Stoic and Christian: 'The cup that my father gives me, shall I not drink it?'" John died a day and a half later in Henry's arms.¹ He was twenty-six years old.

Henry was devastated but held his feelings in check. In fact, his family noted he barely spoke, took no interest in the outdoors, and seemed to register no emotion. Then, to the horror of his family, he too began to develop lockjaw symptoms. Though he had no wound, the symptoms

were severe enough that the Thoreaus and Emersons believed they were about to lose him too. On January 24, Emerson wrote to his brother William, that he had returned from a lecture tour only to find Henry Thoreau, in whom he saw great potential, suffering from the same affliction that had killed his brother John. However, “This morning his affection, be what it may, is relieved, & essentially, & what is best, his own feeling of better health is established.” Though the sympathetic lockjaw symptoms abated, Henry was still not well. He remained lethargic for many months, and a case could be made that he never recovered from the loss of his brother. In the weeks following, his sisters had to lead him outside, and he wrote nothing in his Journal for over two months. Richardson writes, “Even his interest in nature was gone; he was ‘denaturalized,’ as he later admitted to a correspondent.”²²

But the tragedies of that month did not end here. Just as Henry was recovering from sympathetic lockjaw, the Emersons’ precocious and cherished five-year-old son Waldo Jr. came down with scarlet fever³ and died within three days. The connection between Thoreau’s brother and little Waldo extends beyond the proximity of their deaths: the previous summer a traveling daguerreotypist had come to Concord. Both Henry Thoreau and Emerson’s wife Lidian tried to get a likeness of Waldo made, but the boy was too restless for the long exposures required for those images. The following day John Thoreau, who, like his brother, was marvelous with children, took Waldo back and managed to keep him still for the entire five minutes. This precious daguerreotype was the only image the Emersons ever had of their lost child. Many years later, in 1865, Emerson would write in his Journal, “John Thoreau, Junior, knew how much I would value a head of little Waldo, then five years old....He did it, & brought me the daguerre which I thankfully paid for. In a few months, after my boy died, and I have ever since, had deeply to thank John Thoreau for that wise & gentle piece of friendship.”²⁴

Of course, January 1842 is not simply the story of tragic illness in the days before infectious diseases were understood. The disease which took so many of the Emersons and Thoreaus was a common one at the time. Consumption—what we call tuberculosis—was referred to for several centuries as “The New England Disease.” In 1867, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. told his incoming Harvard medical students, “[E]very other resident adult you meet...in these streets is or will be more or less tuberculous. This is not an extravagant estimate as nearly one third of the deaths of adults in Boston last year were from phthisis.”⁵

When Emerson was eleven, he lost his father to consumption. As a young man, he lost his two brilliant younger brothers succumbed, and most tragically for him, his adored first wife, Ellen, who died just before her twentieth birthday, after they had been married only eighteen months. Emerson himself had the disease his entire life, but he managed to keep it under control by knowing how to rest and perhaps by the extreme force of his will. He would die of pneumonia at age seventy-nine. The Thoreau family was even harder hit. The first recorded death of consumption in the family was of John Thoreau, Henry’s grandfather, in 1801 at forty-seven.⁶ Henry’s older sister Helen succumbed in 1849, his father in 1859, and reportedly; his mother, though she lived with the disease until she was eighty-five, family and friends say that it was what finally killed her. John Jr. was suffering acutely from consumption at the time of his death. The brothers had had to shut down their successful school because of John’s frailty. He was frighteningly thin and coughing blood. Considering how minor the cut on his finger was, most likely he developed tetanus because the advanced state of his consumption had destroyed his immune system. And, of course, Henry Thoreau died from it in 1862 when he was only forty-four. We know Thoreau struggled with and tried to ignore his consumption all his life, and never referred to it by name, preferring to say he had a bad cold, the ague, or bronchitis. His first

recorded bout was when he was a nineteen-year-old Harvard student and had to come home for a semester. In 1843 Emerson, still concerned about his friend and protégé, wrote in his Journal how pleased he was that Henry was on the mend from his most recent bout of bronchitis. After the publication of *Walden* in 1854, Thoreau suffered a debilitating weakness in his legs that lasted over a year. For most of his life, he had a constant cough that worsened every winter. Treatment was necessarily primitive. The most benign treatment was advising patients to visit a warm climate. Emerson in the 1820s took that advice and went to St. Augustine, Florida for several months to strengthen his lungs. Otherwise, doctors applied blisters, bled, and suggested that “jolting” on the open road in all kinds of weather could “loosen” the disease from the lungs.⁷ Up until two days before Ellen’s death, Emerson and she dutifully rode horseback and in a buggy in February in a desperate attempt to cure her. Thoreau wisely refused all of his doctors’ remedies except travel to warm, dry Minnesota less than a year before his death, though he most likely traveled more to see the west while he still had time and study the plants of the area than for the salubriousness of the climate. Emerson’s son, Edward Waldo, who adored Thoreau as a child and teenager and was only seventeen when this respected friend died, wrote and delivered in his old age an essay/lecture based on his reminiscences. In the early twentieth century, when knowledge of the disease had increased, Edward, who had been one of Concord’s doctors for a decade, suggested that Thoreau’s early death could have been brought on by the exacerbation of the disease due to the fine graphite dust he breathed in while helping to run the family pencil and graphite business.⁸

II

At the time of his brother’s fatal illness, Henry had been living several months with the Emerson family. Though he moved back home for awhile after John’s illness, he would return,

and his stay would lengthen to a year and a half. He would live there again for nine months after he returned from his sojourn at Walden in 1847 to run the household while Emerson was abroad. Why did he leave his own home for the Emersons? The reason given at the time was his need, as a writer, for quiet. The Thoreaus, especially, Mrs. Thoreau, were all voluble talkers—besides which, she took in borders to help the family finances. In exchange for some gardening and carpentry, Thoreau had room and board and ample quiet to study and write at the Emersons. Lidian and the children adored him and were dependent on him in many ways, particularly when Emerson was off lecturing. But the most compelling feature of the Emerson home, in contrast to the Thoreau's, was Emerson's study and vast library, to which Thoreau had free access. The Thoreaus were not the impoverished yokels they have been made out to be in the past. They were a reading family, and all four of the children taught school. Mrs. Thoreau kept meat, tea, coffee, and sugar off her table for long periods in order to purchase a piano for her two daughters. Playing piano was an "accomplishment" that not only increased the sisters' value as teachers, but put the family squarely within the decorous middle-class. The whole family, aunts included, worked and denied themselves to pay for Henry's Harvard expenses. At least three of the children could read and write Latin fluently. Henry and his older sister, Helen, sometimes corresponded in Latin. Yet the Thoreaus were not a family of intellectuals. They enjoyed the popular fiction the transcendentalists denied themselves, or at least pretended to. And until the family moved to the "Yellow House" in 1850, where Thoreau set up his attic study and library, none of their houses had a room set apart for study, reading, and philosophical discussion like Emerson's. Thoreau was one of the first members of his family to attend college; Emerson was descended from seven generations of ministers. The intellectuals (and cranks) of the day were all

drawn to the Emerson home, to discuss “the newness”⁹ Plato, reason and understanding, while the Thoreaus enjoyed gossiping with their neighbors.

Yet John and Henry were inordinately close. Concord was a small village and no doubt the brothers saw each other often, but this was not the same as living under the same roof. John had begun studying botany in the fields and woods before Henry and taught his younger brother. John and John Sr. were both excellent flutists, and Henry presumably learned from them, and the whole family sang. But in attending Harvard, aligning himself with Emerson to the extent that he left home to live with Emerson’s family could have put distance between the brothers. In fact, generations of critics have blamed Henry’s sympathetic lockjaw with guilt, though not for the reason I am suggesting.¹⁰

Like most Romantics, Thoreau prized childhood, though he took it a step beyond many others and worshipped the state of boyhood. From the time he was barely out of boyhood, he felt a terrible sense of loss from that period of his life. His Journal is full of descriptions of young boys that filled him with vicarious pleasure and deep sorrow. His last link with his boyhood was his brother John. In 1837, newly home, graduated from Harvard, Thoreau wrote letters to his sister Helen and his brother John, who were both off teaching. To Helen he writes an affectionate and even playful letter, typical of an adult sibling, explaining that the shortness of his letter does not indicate a lack of fondness, but that not much of interest is going on and he would rather not burden her with trivialities. Around the same time he writes a very different letter to his brother. Thoreau was always fascinated by the Native Americans both symbolically and as an ethnographer. In fact, at the time of his death he had amassed such a huge amount of information on the habits, livelihoods, and languages of the Indians who had once flourished in New England that critics to this day believe he was planning a book on them. But in the letter to John he does

nothing so much as “play Indian” as the two had done as children. He calls himself “Tahatawan” the sachem and his “brother sachem” Hopewell. When he talks about “the pale faces,” he means the Thoreau womenfolk: “There is no seat for Tahatawan in the council-house. He lets the squaws speak.” The letter is very clever, using conventionalized Indian dialect to give news of home, but one gets the impression that this was something the brothers had long done as boys, and the time is rapidly passing for this kind of relating to one another.¹¹

The change began with the coming of members of the Sewall family from nearby Scituate. In the fall of 1838, Henry and John opened a school for boys (though some local girls attended). At first the school met in the family home, but as enrollment expanded, the brothers took over the old Concord Academy, which had become vacant. The out-of-town boys boarded at the Thoreau home. Among Mrs. Thoreau’s favorite borders were Mrs. Joseph Ward and her unmarried middle-aged daughter Prudence Ward. When their eleven-year-old grandson and nephew came to visit in June of 1839, Henry was immediately taken with him. Soon after the boy left, Henry wrote him a poem called “Sympathy,” which critics have argued about for more than one-hundred-fifty years. Is he writing such an admiring a poem about a young boy with or without homoerotic overtones? Does he refer to the “gentle boy” to conceal the true topic of the poem, the boy’s seventeen-year-old sister, Ellen? The strangest thing about these arguments is that they disregard the poem’s title and the fact that it is an elegy. “Sympathy” in the nineteenth century was not a more polite form of pity—it meant fellow feeling. Two people in sympathy understood one another. However, what is most obviously overlooked is the fact that the poem is an elegy. But an elegy for whom? Edmund Sewall was a healthy boy and would be enrolled in the Thoreau brothers’ school the following term. Ellen was also strong and healthy and would pay two visits to Concord, go on to marry a Unitarian minister, and live to be a contented old

lady. What seems most likely to this reader is that the elegy is to Henry Thoreau's lost boyhood, which he sees in this "gentle boy."

The first stanza is: "Lately alas, I knew a gentle boy,/Whose features all were cast in Virtue's mold,/As one she had designed for Beauty's toy,/But after manned him for her own stronghold." Virtue, in the classical sense in which Thoreau understood it, meant a kind of innocence that was associated with forbearance, continence and bravery. At first nature was happy to make him a toy of beauty, simply to give pleasure to the senses. Later, she realized, he deserved to man the very innocence of nature—something fallen man in his adult state could not do. Several stanzas later we get to the sense of loss Thoreau feels in the contemplation of this perfect boyhood: "We two were one while we did sympathize/So could we not the simplest bargain drive;/And what avails it now that we are wise,/If absence does this doubleness contrive?" As long as the man and boy saw nature by the same lights, they could function as one entity. But the knowledge that comes from the man's fallen nature separates him from the boy's natural wisdom. The fall of man is not so fortunate in that it creates this terrible absence and loss. He ends with one last attempt to have the boy and man sympathize with each other, but that is only through the aegis of nature, which is never fallen: "If I but love that virtue which he is,/Though it be scented in the morning air,/Still shall we be truest acquaintances,/Nor mortals know a sympathy more rare."¹² The poem mourns the loss of the sympathy Thoreau could have had with Edmund Sewall if he still possessed the innocence of nature that among humans is only the provenance of children. The proof of this would come home to him with the arrival that summer of Edmund's seventeen-year-old sister Ellen, with whom both Thoreau brothers would fall in love.

The double courtship of Ellen Sewall has its echo in the doubling of consciousness of the two brothers in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau's first book and an elegy to his brother. In the real time of early September 1839, before the two-week excursion had become a mythic journey of remembrance, the day after the brothers returned to Concord, John set off for Scituate to propose. Ellen, who said yes but then took back her acceptance after consulting her father. Two days after Ellen's refusal of John, Henry mailed his proposal. This time Ellen consulted her father first, and sent Henry a brief refusal. Henry had stepped back, waited, and then mirrored his brother's action. This way of experiencing the social world through his brother's experience of it, and acting on that experience, is shown repeatedly in *A Week*. He writes, "Occasionally one ran along the shore...visiting the nearest farm-houses, while the other followed the windings of the stream alone to meet his companion at some distant point, and hear the report of his adventures."¹³ Looked back upon by the surviving brother, Ellen's rejection of both completed the doubleness of the courtship. It is as though the loss of the girl and the loss of the brother become one fact in the act of remembering.

Yet it is difficult to integrate this ardent young Thoreau with the deliberately aloof and asexual mature Thoreau. Ellen Sewall was an extremely pretty girl, lively, intelligent, and full of enthusiasms. Apparently the Thoreau brothers weren't the only young men in Concord who tried to woo her, but it was the stern and awkward Henry Thoreau she seemed to have preferred. Of her character Robert Richardson writes, "Her first thank-you letter, written immediately after her first trip to Concord, is surprising by its excess...The event was barely over, but already it is treated as a distant and treasured past. Over a year later, after John's proposal but before Henry's, she wrote again to her aunt about Concord in the same elegiac fashion, as though reconciled to losses eons ago" (61-62). Perhaps it is this shared sense of memorializing the past even as it

enters the instant of transition between present and past that drew the young Henry Thoreau to this particular girl. He says in “Sunday,” “On this same stream a maiden once sailed in my boat, thus unattended except by invisible guardians, and as she sat in the prow there was nothing but herself between the steersman and the sky” (38). Here he meshes past and present. In the real time of the narrative, both brothers had rowed the same maiden on the same river just weeks before. But by changing the first person to “the steersman” he is not only calling up the brothers’ tandem courtship, but making the experience of youth and maiden on the river archetypal, a dead image on the “dead” river but at the same time alive in the sense of the language of nature creating memory. “Such is the never-failing beauty and accuracy of language, the most perfect art in the world; the chisel of a thousand years retouches it” (35).

In 1839, the rivalry over Ellen must have been a pressingly present reality between the brothers. But with his brother’s death in 1842, the whole meaning of the dual courtship must have changed. Ellen, like her brother Edmund, became a figure of memory, subject to the same chisel as language. Thoreau placed many of his poems from the late 1830s in *A Week*, but I find especially interesting the inclusion of “Sympathy.” As the epitome of all “lovely boys” John Thoreau seems to replace young Edmund as the lost boy who can only be accessed through nature. The poem truly becomes an elegy, and as archetypal as the youth and maiden rowing on the river. It is primarily as an elegiac book I would that like to consider *A Week*.

III

Most readers believe that *A Week* telescopes two weeks into one, but that is not so. Thoreau mentions in “Thursday”—albeit briefly—that he and John stow their boat and hike for six days. They leave the river on Thursday morning and return the following Thursday evening and so spend in name, if not in fact, a full, single week completing their circuit of the rivers. This

circularity, as I discussed in the Introduction, is fundamental to Thoreau's view of experience and enhances the sense of anticipation by making us follow the circle of one week until it ends spatially, if not temporally, where it started. The structure of the chapters mimics the structure of the book in that during digressions we anticipate a return to the temporal narrative and during the narrative we anticipate the various disquisitions on poetry, religion, philosophy, and friendship.

Thoreau begins his story in the first person singular. He contemplates the river in past perfect—"I had often stood on the banks of the Concord"—which implies a layering of past times. He remembers remembering the past, and concludes, "The chips and weeds and occasional logs and stems of trees that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me" (13). "Singular" has more than one meaning in this sentence. Besides the obvious definition, particular, it serves to emphasize the speaker's solitude, the absolute "I" of his remembrance. After long contemplation, the speaker, like the detritus on the river, will allow himself to drift with the current, in this case the current of memory, to a narrative of how "we" evolved into "I."

Heroism and dying are significant elements of this book, underscored by Thoreau's frequent reference to ancient poetry. One of the tasks he prepares for himself in his narrative is to project his brother into a natural/heroic dialectic. His book, like nature, will speak in a timeless language that keeps his brother alive in his youth, at his perfect moment of physical and psychic ripeness before his fall into death. He writes, "For their beauty, consider the fables of Narcissus, of Endymion, of Memnon son of morning, the representative of all promising youths who have died a premature death, and whose memory is prolonged to the latest morning" (48). Morning, Thoreau will say in *Walden*, always brings back the heroic age. Beautiful youths who die young, both the heroes of myth and his brother, will always live in the heroic age of the morning.

Anticipation plays a principal role in Thoreau's use time, switching as he does from the present vantage of his writing backwards to excursions he made after his brother's death, to that late summer of 1839 when the young men took the narrative journey of the book. For example, in "Sunday" he discusses the change in the landscape made by the railroad since the 1839 trip. "But the real vessels are the railroad cars, and its main stream... may be traced by a long line of vapor amid the hills which no morning wind ever disperses" (71). Writing in the present tense for 1839 anticipates the railroad in a future that does not include his brother, and making the present past prophesies both the railroad and an altered landscape his brother will never know.

Earlier, in "Sunday," he writes, Emerson-like, "[M]ythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted. Either time or rare wisdom writes it" (49). In *A Week*, Thoreau is consciously creating a mythology of a time that seems as long in the past as the Indian wars, and yet deeply felt in the present. He plays with the idea of "common sense" the same way he does in "Ktaadn," as a shared sensation that touches all people regardless of time, place, or identity. Time steps back from timelessness and bears it witness.

In "Monday," he writes, "[O]ur reflections anticipated our progress somewhat,--we were advancing farther into the country and into the day" (99). Once again in this pun he conflates the spatial and the temporal as the brothers adumbrate themselves in new epochs and vistas. Just as the brothers' shadows and thoughts anticipate their progress, Thoreau's prophecy of his brother's shadow pressages the narrative. He says, "You must be calm before you can utter oracles... Enthusiasm is a supernatural serenity" (103). The brothers' youthful enthusiasm anticipates the

serenity of his description of the river as well as, in a larger sense, the serenity needed—the retreat to Walden Pond—to record and mythologize his particular narrative.

One of his most arresting images of his lost brother occurs when Thoreau is talking about his aversion to graves and monuments, which leads to his comparison of remembrance with a vision of trees in the mist. He writes, “The crowd stood admiring the mist and the dim outlines of the trees seen through it, when one of their number advanced to explore the phenomenon, and with fresh admiration all eyes were turned on his dimly retreating figure” (125). This is an echo of his headnote poem, in which he calls on his brother to be his Muse. The fact that the viewers are studying a natural phenomenon emphasizes the physicality of nature even in the midst of a philosophical musing. His book, he anticipates, will bring his readers to admire the brother retreating into the mist, the experience always new, the admiration always fresh, even as the brother’s physicality is slowly absorbed in the mist. Without physicality, even as a memory or idea, John is still a figure in the landscape. The prophecy continues a few pages later when the brothers see the waters of the Merrimack melding with the Nashua and encircling the Nashua Valley. Thoreau goes on to say, “There where it seemed uninterrupted forest to our youthful eyes, between two neighboring pines in the horizon, lay the valley of the Nashua” (131). Once again, perception looks through the mist to something glorious. The brothers are still young enough to see an entire pine forest through the emblematic double pine trees. Looking toward the Nashua River, they are anticipating a rarefied, always youthful, version of themselves with all the world before them. The images both challenge and conflate the fleeting and the permanent.

Just as the tandem existence of the brothers is reflected in the two pine trees, their tandem activity is mirrored in the wild pigeons and the pair of red squirrels in “Tuesday.” Thoreau says the birds had filled the sky in the morning “but now like ourselves [are] spending their noon in

the shade.” Not until a few sentences later does he give us a more ominous meaning for shade, when he tells us he and John took advantage of the pigeons’ resting and made it permanent for one of them. He mocks his own ideas of dying and heroism when he says he and his brother persevered “heroically” by gutting and spitting the bird that he feels should have been left alive. He expands the idea into a questioning of dying and nature. “Nature herself has not provided the most graceful end for her creatures...we do not see the bodies lie about...they must perish miserably; not one of them is translated” (180-181). The killing of one pigeon is suggestive of John’s death, but the murder of the two squirrels contains the larger implication of the death of both brothers. Even before the killing of the pigeon, he describes the antics of the two red squirrels that morning. They run in tandem in the pine trees, one squirrel giving warning to the other of the brothers’ approach. He makes their death more shocking by his exuberant description of their “devising through what safe valve of frisk or somerset to let [their]...superfluous life escape” (159). We do not learn until many pages later, the evening of Tuesday, that the brothers have killed their squirrel counterparts. They cannot even eat them as they did the pigeon; they throw their skinned little bodies away and eat rice. Thoreau likens the squirrels to larger animals and lets the reader take the intuitive leap from cattle to men. The brothers refuse to eat the squirrels—but they nonetheless have added to the invisible carnage in nature Thoreau had acknowledged over the roasting of the pigeon.

Thoreau contrasts himself and his brother at the end of “Sunday,” and in doing so suggests that his brother, after death, is still with him. The following is the only passage in the book besides the headnote poem that implicitly gives the reader the dead brother as an ever-present guiding spirit. “One sailor was visited in his dreams by the Evil Destinies...which constrain and oppress the minds of men. But the other happily passed a serene and even

ambrosial or *immortal* night... a happy natural sleep until the morning; and his cheerful spirit soothed and reassured his brother, for wherever they meet, the Good Genius is sure to prevail” [emphasis added] (94). Once again he uses grammar to conflate narratives. “This night” puts the moment in the present and “whenever they meet” implies a relationship that will not end. That his brother achieves immortality in his sleep puts the narrator in a timeless present in which the brother is always sleeping at his side. The many other journeys Thoreau describes within the narrative are therefore continuations of this central journey. One other journey that resonates with the present/absent brother is the hike up Saddleback Mountain, in which Henry, in his sleep, recreates his brother’s immortality.

At dusk, when he reaches the summit of the mountain, Thoreau describes the remnants of other campers, particularly rhapsodizing about the newspapers in which they wrapped their food. As always, Thoreau’s humor signals his serious intentions. These advertisements become the last vestiges of the civilized world. It seems strange that so experienced an outdoorsman as Thoreau would have come to the top of a mountain so poorly prepared—no water, no blankets—but this is primarily another of Thoreau’s psychic excursions. In going to sleep he dies, and lays himself in a coffin. “I at length completely encased myself in boards, managing even to put a board on top of me with a large stone to hold it down” (152). When he awakens and rises from his improvised coffin, it is into a different world, one reminiscent of the “ambrosial, immortal” dream landscape of his brother’s happy sleep. “As the light increased I discovered around me an ocean of mist, which...shut out every vestige of the earth, while I was left floating on this fragment of the wreck of the world, on my carved plank in cloudland...the new *terra firma* perchance of my future life.” With his further description of the prospect, he places himself in “the dazzling halls of Aurora,” that same dawn in which youths of promise who die young are

perpetually found. The fact that he has journeyed to the place where his brother dwells in dreams and out of time he emphasizes by describing the scene: “It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise” (153). Being still part of the temporal world, however, he cannot remain in the dream landscape. His return to earth shows him just how different a world he had entered. The mist eventually dissipates, and he must climb down into “the region of cloud and drizzling rain, and the inhabitants affirmed it had been a cloudy and drizzly day wholly” (155).

He continues to conflate and challenge the fleeting and the permanent as “Tuesday” progresses: “When out of history the truth shall be extracted, it will have shed its dates like withered leaves” (177). In his prophecy, the leaves of history books will have withered into the timelessness of truth. He continues his discussion of prophetic timelessness when he comes to the inanimate lives of rocks and stones in “Wednesday.” The stones are pulled into “new freshets receiving the aid of fresh stones, which are drawn into this trap...until they either wear out, or wear through the bottom of their prison, or else are released by some revolution of Nature...In one instance...they [the freshets] have worn quite through the rock, so that a portion of the river leaks through in anticipation of the fall.” Water and rock exist in slow time, in patterns and cycles hard to be comprehended by the human imagination. The conflation of the fleeting and the permanent contains the caution that permanence is a human construct. This shows that everything on the river must have lived through some kind of past, even non-living matter. Just as with language, “The finest workers in stone are not copper or steel tools, but the gentle touches of air and water working at their leisure with an ample allowance of time...They [the Hindu and Chinese philosophers] reach back to the time when the race of mortals is confounded with the race of gods, are as nothing compared with the periods which these stones have

inscribed” (201-202). The stones reach back to the vanishing point where time becomes timelessness. The world is almost infinitely old, and the loss of John is one trickle of water on the older-than-the-gods rocks, the most recent layer of loss in uncounted layers that go back almost to a time before time.

The meditation on rocks and water is the perfect introduction to the meditation on friendship. The rocks are covered with the “dust of Nature,” (204) and the Friend, too, is now the dust of nature. Friendship is “a drama that is always tragic,” because true friendship always has a tragic side: it is aligned with what he earlier called nature’s “incessant tragedies” because it always in the process of dying. “When they say farewell then we begin to keep them company” (216). He has bid farewell to his physical bond with his brother, and in recreating their journey he is writing from the vantage point of pure friendship—a shared consciousness. When he says most friends “are not transfigured and translated by love in each other’s presence” (217), he implies the notion of translation to another world. This revisits the idea that “none are ever translated” when he talks about the creatures of nature, but from a new perspective, that translation *is* possible, as John’s translation illustrates. He says of such true friendships, “They are few and rare, indeed, but like a strain of music, they are incessantly repeated and modulated by the *memory*” [emphasis added] (219). With the mind of a musician, Thoreau understands how a tune can be varied and in sense he can hear strains of John through memory, always changing, always varied and fresh, much like the young streams feeding the river on which they row upwards, and not static as one assumes the dead to be.

As friendship exists in memory, so does it exist in anticipation. “It requires immaculate and godlike qualities full-grown, and exists only by condescension and anticipation” (224). By making friendship an act concurrently of memory and anticipation, Thoreau emphasizes its

prophetic timelessness, that time between past and future that can only exist in the exact present moment, as he will say in *Walden*. John, his Friend, by dying has made himself as timeless as memory or anticipation and always exists to inspire his brother to emulation.

In anticipation of his discourse on silence in “Friday” he says, “In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not where there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is misunderstood” (226). Once again he introduces tragedy into friendship. The greater tragedy is misunderstanding silence, which encompasses all knowledge, and to misunderstand your friend’s silence is to be blind and deaf to him. John Thoreau’s dying created a profound silence in his brother’s life, which to misunderstand would be to deny he ever existed. Because of this profound silence, which is wordless if not tuneless, there can be no mere exchange of words, no explanation. The friend lives in silent memory and anticipation—only in this way can his consciousness be shared to the extent that his friend will never misunderstand him. He anticipates the moment of his own translation and the presence of his friend at that moment. Memory brings the friend to that dying moment and anticipation intimates that soon he and his friend will share a profound silence in an ethereal world. Anticipation and memory form a circle as “the latest November” is the same as “the ruddy morning of youth.” Boundaries dissolve, and to love the friend is to love nature. In this sense there is a synthesis of consciousness—the Emerson Me—and nature, the Not Me. “Even the death of Friends will inspire us as much as their lives” (233). Dying is the final expression of the sublimity of friendship. The inspiration keeps the Friend living as long as his survivor lives in the consolation the Friend leaves behind in the divine example of his living. Friends don’t have a place in the graveyard because they are anticipated in every inspiration and expiration. Instead of being stuck in one time and place as one imagines the dead to be, the dead Friend moves through time and space in the eternal

present, “the meeting of two eternities.” The dream Thoreau recounts at the end of the chapter confirms this. “I dreamed this night...of a difference with a Friend...But in the dream ideal justice was at length done me for his suspicions and I received that compensation which I had never obtained in my waking hours” (242). Dreams are generated by that ethereal world where his friend lives and where Thoreau believes he will one day live. In this ideal realm of friendship all misunderstandings are silenced and all hurts are compensated. In dying, the friend is more strongly present than ever.

In “Thursday” the brothers “lie drenched on a bed of withered wild oats” (246) when they awake in the morning. This is a pregnant image that places them in a moment between living and dying. The wild oats, a symbol of youthful adventuring, are withering away. At the same time, they are sensuously drenched, seemingly full of life. Thoreau follows this image with a poem in which he casts off his books to be fully engaged in nature, living “a purely sensuous life.” The poem is in first-person singular, and the poet is alone in nature in the present time recounting the past and bringing it up to the present time of the poem. Thoreau moves from contemplating the two brothers to observing ants, dew, clouds, and a bed of wild oats. He says, “I am well drenched upon my bed of oats” (247) and embeds himself in consecutive historical presents which are in fact two layers of the past. Doubly, then singly, the young men/man have lain drenched on withering wild oats, and then have passed on. The poem contains a paradox: it shrugs off the call of books to be in nature, but that moment cannot continue to exist except in the leaves of a book. The brothers together on their bed of oats are even more distant, and more obscure, without the book of Thoreau’s remembrance.

Later in the chapter he writes, “In the wildest nature, there is not only the material of the most cultivated life, and a sort of anticipation of the last result, but a greater refinement already

than is ever attained by any man” (258). “Last result” implies last things—if not the end of time, then the end of a completed cycle. This result is anticipated in nature by a “greater refinement” than man outside of nature can achieve. Once again he is using paradox to conflate time. The idea is that in some future moment man, through self-cultivation, will achieve less coarseness and increased refinement, yet in nature that moment exists in full fruition in the present. This present moment is “later” than the previous passage where he lay alone on his bed of drenched withered wild oats, because it is the eternal present where wild oats don’t wither but are drenched to greater fruitfulness. This fruitfulness anticipates the continued presence of the lost brother in the present.

A trope that Thoreau will return to many times in his later writing is that of the western orientation. As Thoreau would have known, in Celtic tradition, to “turn west” is to turn toward dying (OED). Despite the significance of the new day in *A Week* and *Walden*, the end of the day has equal gravity, if not more. “In deep ravines under the eastern sides of cliffs, Night forwardly plants her foot even at noonday, and even as the day retreats she steps into his trenches, skulking from tree to tree...It may be said that the forenoon is brighter than the afternoon...because we naturally look into the west, as forward into the day, and so in the forenoon see the sunny side of things, but in the afternoon the shadow of every tree” (261). To look forward into the day is to anticipate its end, and just as each day of the week’s journey comes to an end, so must the journey itself. “Thursday” is the preparation for the end of the journey, the beginning of a transition. To this end Thoreau writes, “True and sincere travelling is no pastime but is as serious as the grave, or any part of the human journey” (250). He associates traveling with an end of the human journey, a westward sunset turning to the grave. A journey, like a life, should be complete, fulfilled and honorable, and never be undertaken lightly. Thoreau undertakes two journeys in *A*

Week—the journey he and his brother take in 1839 and the journey his memory takes to that original journey. Connecting these two are the bridges of later excursions he makes alone after his brother's death but before his retelling of their journey together. All these journeys contain the westward orientation of the day's end and the coming of night, when no one can travel.

The most compelling of the historical narratives Thoreau interweaves into *A Week* is the story of Hannah Dustan. Hannah's story is one of the most famous of the seventeenth century captivity narratives. During King William's War in 1697, the Abenaki Indians raided her village of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Her husband and her eight children managed to escape, but Hannah, her nurse, Mary Neff, and Hannah's infant were taken captive. Before marching them north, the Indians bashed the infant's head on an apple tree. Hannah and Mary were taken to an island at the mouth of the Merrimack River where they were joined by Samuel Lenderson, a fourteen-year-old boy. One night, while their captors were sleeping, Hannah, Mary, and Samuel killed nine Indians with tomahawk blows to their heads and started down the Merrimack to freedom. However, Hannah decided they should turn around and collect the scalps of the murdered Indians as proof of what they had done, and in order to collect the bounty, after which they headed back down the river.

Thoreau tells us that the transformation from summer to fall takes place Thursday night but in fact he first mentions autumn late Thursday afternoon, when he is concluding the Dustan story. Daniel Peck notes that, in the second paragraph of Thoreau's retelling of Hannah's story, "the narration shifts abruptly into the present, as the historical time of Henry Thoreau and Hannah Dustan conflate...creating the effect that Thoreau and his brother John have joined Hannah's party and are participating in its flight."¹⁴ What the brothers would be fleeing would be historical time, as they move with Hannah into Thoreau's mythology of timelessness. Thoreau

chooses compelling details for the retelling of her story. He shows Hannah and her party returning to the scene of the massacre to take the scalps as proof of what they had done. This parallels the surviving brother's story in the sense that he too for most of the journey moves against the current—back to retrieve the dead from obscurity. He writes of Hannah and her companions, "They are thinking of the dead they left behind...and of the relentless living warriors who are in pursuit" (263). Like the Thoreau brothers, Hannah and her companions pass innumerable graves. The graves they see, however, are Indian graves, which had mostly vanished by 1839. Thoreau's most startling image, and one he comes back to, is the apple tree on which Hannah's infant had had its "brains dashed out." The surviving members of Hannah's family reassemble, minus the dead infant at the apple tree. "There have been many who in later times have lived to say they have eaten the fruit of this apple tree." Stanley Fink notes, "They reached their homes with their trophies, but the bloodstained apple tree stands as an emblem of the Fall, and subsequent generations have continued to eat of its fruit."¹⁵ This apple tree is a clear reminder of the Fall because of what comes next.

There is a break in the prose after the above Thoreau passage; then he goes on to say, "This seems a long while ago, yet it happened since Milton wrote his *Paradise Lost*" (264). In this way Thoreau connects the apple tree on which Hannah lost her infant to the apple tree in Eden. His concern is not sin but rather its consequence—death, and the knowledge of death. Hannah becomes one in a chain of Eves that stretches from the beginning of time to the time of Thoreau's remembrance: "Taking hold of hands they would span the interval from Eve to my own mother. A respectable tea party merely—whose gossip would be Universal History" (265). In domesticating death, he is once again naturalizing it, in the universal symbol of the fruit which brought death into the world.

Apple trees are everywhere in *A Week*. The white farmer came and “planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple tree to blossom next to the wild pine and juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness.” The very ambivalence and ubiquitousness of the apple tree is related to dying. The tree is nourishing, beautiful, and fragrant, but its planters brought death to the original inhabitants. Now the first farmers are long dead, and memories of them are fading like the ruins of their homesteads. Thoreau notes the declivities in the ground where their apple trees once grew. Yet the trees usually outlive many generations of humans. He says elsewhere that even the oldest trees still bear blossoms and fruit on their remaining branches. This continued life is reminiscent of the many old border characters in his narrative who live to bear fruit for the narrator’s memory. The old fisherman in his “naturalized” coat is one of these, and so is the old woman—another gossiping Eve—approached by the railroad managers. When these important men ask her how high she remembers the river to have risen, she goes to an apple tree planted by her ancestors and with the help of her elderly husband, locates the nail that was driven into its trunk to mark the height of the great flood—another Biblical event. The men do not believe her, but of course she is right, as the next flood proves. The final apple tree in the book, the one where the brothers tie up their boat, was there at the beginning.

As Thursday, the summer, and the journey draw to a close, Thoreau employs an image that calls up his earlier image of the figure stepping forward into the mist. “[T]he shore itself, and the distant cliffs, were dissolved by the undiluted air. The hardest material seemed to obey the same law as the most fluid, and so indeed, in the long run it does” (268). The very planet, at the height of its living, is dissolving into a mist. The shadowy brother in this sense cannot be lost, because the whole planet, even as it is in the constant motion of being alive, is fading out of

sight. The journey on the rivers is of course a fluid one and the hardest material—death—obeys fluid laws in the long run. Dying naturally rounds out the westward course of living, but anything once living is living still.

The great moment of transition is during the night between Thursday and Friday, when the season changes, and Henry prepares to take leave of his brother. As Robert Milder points out, “The chapter opens with a change of season...that can signal either a reinvigoration of life after the hot, dusty Concord summer, or the incursion of time, history, decay, and death into the travelers’ and New England’s idyll.”¹⁶ The speed of the brothers’ return creates an elegiac air for what was so significantly shared between them—their youth. Everywhere in the book where Thoreau describes himself taking later, solitary journeys, and making his solitary speculations, we get the sense of a man now fully grown, alone at Walden, writing the single journal of his remembrance. For a writer so full of sounds and silences, the exuberant noise of the brothers is arresting. At the beginning of “Tuesday,” the brothers are up way before dawn to awaken the woods with their loud busyness. As they sail into the locks that will take them back to the Concord River Friday afternoon, each eats half an apple pie, a powerful symbol. The description of the scene is full of youth and exuberance. “We bounded merrily before a smacking breeze, with a devil-may-care look in our faces” (293). Yet the scene is described without sound, like a very old memory or a dream. We are prepared for this elegiac set piece a few pages earlier when Thoreau describes his present solitude. Once again the brothers act in tandem, one going ashore to buy pie from a farmer’s wife, the other remaining in the boat. But this time they are as separated temporally as they are spatially. Their “supply was now exhausted”—the used up store of provisions standing for the lost companionship, and “the other [Henry] sitting in the boat which was moored to the shore, left *alone* to his own reflections” [emphasis added] (292).

On Thursday night, as the season is preparing to change and the brothers are preparing for sleep, Thoreau for the first time uses the plural in reference to the journal of their excursion and says they write in “their” journals. In the following paragraph he immediately goes back to the single journal: “Unfortunately, many things have been omitted which should have been included in our journal” (270). After this, he does not mention writing again—his brother’s voice has departed from his experience, and now the only “journal” that remains is the book that we are reading, an act of reconstructive work the narrator shares with his reader. There is a parallel in experience passing into memory in the change of the seasons: “for summer passes into autumn in some unimaginable point in time, like the turning of a leaf” (272).

In “Friday” he begins autumn with a prophecy of the winter sure to come. “In all the woods the leaves were fast ripening for their fall...and we knew that the maples, stripped of their leaves among the earliest, would soon stand like a wreath of smoke along the edge of the meadow” (273). His use of “we” is particularly interesting here. Above he says, “[W]e fancied by the faces of men that the Fall had commenced.” He makes his brother and himself complicit in this knowledge that one, like summer, is dying, and the other, like the seasons to come, is still living. The “wreath of smoke along the edge of the meadow” testifies to this because it is an image of a burned out fire, the lost summer and the lost brother. Yet by using “we” he keeps the brother living in the shared consciousness of the moment of passing.

Further elegizing his brother in his mediation on thinking and poetry, he writes, “Great men, unknown to their generation, have their fame among the great who have preceded them, and all true worldly fame subsides from their highest estimate beyond the stars” (277). Here, he is punning on “fame,” which had two meanings in the nineteenth century, the one we are accustomed to and also simply a man’s good name. If a man’s good name precedes him, Thoreau

is making this preceding millennial—his name precedes him before and after history. If fame is an acknowledged greatness of achievement, it can only be truly known by the ages. Of course he is referring to his own ambition for fame in both senses, but the implication is that through his own knowledge and his shared memorializing, that fame belongs to his brother as well.

The middle stanza of “The Poet’s Delay” reads, “Amidst such boundless wealth without,/I only still am poor within,/The birds have sung their summer out,/But still my spring does not begin” (279). He places himself behind the smoke of autumn-to-winter and even the summer just passed, which begs the question, who has just experienced the seasonal change? The obvious answer is that Thoreau gained his knowledge through the shared consciousness with his brother but in the voice of the single poet, the voice of “my journal;” he is still the tyro. With his brother as Muse, however, he will eventually bring his own year about.

He says, “The places where we had stopped or spent the night on our way up the river, had already acquired a slight historical interest for us” (287). “Slight” appears to be an understatement, as the whole book has involved the placement of the brothers in history. They are now embedded in the most recent layer of the landscape, above the Indians, the settlers and fishermen, the burgeoning industrialization. Their journey has partaken of every level of history and become history as well. The use of “we” is again interesting here because it seems to imply a final backward glance of the lost brother as he assumes his place in history for his brother and his brother’s readers. Thoreau goes on to say, “Already the banks and the distant meadows wore a sober and deepened tinge for the September air had shorn them of their summer’s pride.” The remaining brother, on his way to being alone, has lost his summer’s pride too. The youth and sap that flowed through and connected the brothers is slipping away and leaving a sober, grown man to take his own place in history, a history that begins with the fall.

The perpetual health of nature is a theme Thoreau always returns to. “Only the convalescent raise the veil of nature. An immortality in his life would confer immortality on his abode. The winds should be his breath, the seasons his moods, and he should impart of his serenity to Nature herself” (307). Of course, as he has been intimating throughout the book, the lost friend is not really dead but can be located in nature. Immortality inheres in the wind’s breath, and the survivor can partake of this immortality if he can match the serenity of he who is dead but not lost. Though Thoreau returns in a fall mood, fall, as he has demonstrated, has many moods. The very immortality that now defines his brother increases the serenity of nature. Yet, just previously he said in a poem, “The mast is drooping within my woods,/The winter is lurking within my moods,/And the rustling of the winter leaf/Is the constant music of my grief.” The two most significant words in the last line are “music” and “grief.” After the joyous placement of the brothers in nature, he still feels grief for his companion’s loss. But music is always an important image for Thoreau. Grief cannot be all-encompassing if it has a background music. A strain of music changes and there is music for grief and joy, perhaps the same music heard differently. Coming from a withered leaf, it is the music of nature. It predicts winter, but logically spring follows to the extent that the withered leaf implies both the lost spring, as did the missing riverbank flowers in “Saturday,” and the spring that will follow the inevitable winter.

As the book draws to a close, the “we” of John and Henry becomes a more universal “we” represented by Thoreau and his readers. “Thus thoughtfully we were rowing homeward to find some autumnal work to do, and help on the revolution of the seasons” (315). Conscious of the fall—from both grace and youth—Thoreau still sees in the cyclical movement of nature the hopefulness of spring and morning; morning work is preceded by autumnal work. Rather than

fall out of time, Thoreau suggests that merging with nature makes living a form of moving time, bringing on the revolution of the seasons.

Though both brothers participate in the action of “Friday,” I find John’s presence notably diminished in Thoreau’s experience of the return voyage. Thoreau has told the narrative to remember his brother, and he brings the lost brother back through representation rather than through experience. John exists in the summer of experience, and in autumn he can only be remembered. Thoreau creates an autumn that is full of movement and energy, the most fulsome time of the year, but it is also tinged with dying. “By the hue of the grapevine, the goldfinch on the willow, the flickers flying in flocks, and when we passed near enough to see the shore, by the faces of men, that the Fall had commenced.” It is only in this passage that he uses “Fall” instead of “autumn,” and this word choice resonates with the earlier reference to *Paradise Lost*. There is an awareness of death in the faces they meet. When he says, “Our thoughts, too, began to rustle” (273), the “we” is not just Henry and John, but all of mankind in the restlessness that precedes dying.

Thoreau emphasizes the elegiac purposes of “Friday” by the return in the afternoon of summer weather, as the brothers must begin rowing as they enter the Concord River. This summer weather represents a kind of Indian Summer nostalgia for the brothers who departed, and it emphasizes that in the narrative of remembrance, only one brother can return. In his description of their tandem activity he says, “When one landed to stretch his limbs by walking, he soon found himself falling behind his companion,” (287)—a symbol of Henry being left behind by John’s flight from this world. At the end it is Henry, rather than John, who leaves the boat for the shore. John, in the boat, keeps slipping out of Henry’s grasp. The dead slip away and

are in some measure lost to us. “This is his grief. Let him turn which way he will, it falls opposite to the sun; short at noon, long at eve. Did you ever see it?” (286).

The bird imagery in *A Week* near the end of the book anticipates the bird imagery in *Walden*. One of the most famous passages in *Walden* occurs in “Spring,” the description of the Merlin hawk, and is generally taken as a description of Thoreau himself. “It sported with proud reliance in the fields of air...it appeared to have no companion in the universe—sporting there alone—and to need none but the morning and the ether with which it played” (574). There is a corresponding passage located similarly at the end of *A Week*. “Two herons... with their long and slender limbs revealed against the sky—their lofty and silent flight, as they were wending their way at evening, surely not to alight in any marsh on the earth’s surface, but perchance on the other side of the atmosphere” (316). The herons are as united as the hawk is solitary. The significant difference is the hawk never lands, but sports always on the ether. The herons do have a destination, though it does not exist in the temporal world. He says they are “bound to some northern meadow.” The union of these two creatures is as inexplicable as their destination; “they are a symbol for the ages to study, whether impressed upon the sky, or sculptured amid the hieroglyphics of Egypt.” The dead are everywhere around us but are always a mystery to be contemplated, a memory to be created. The elusiveness of the dead corresponds to the elusiveness of time—they exist on the other side of the atmosphere, behind the fog that envelopes the mountains and rivers. The story of the dead brother can never be completely told—we are left only with the narrative of “I,” the voice of the one left behind, and that too is a temporal voice.

Thoreau approaches the end with a meditation on silence. Of course he is in one sense referring to the silence of death, but another element of silence is anticipation. In a piece of

music, Thoreau knew, anticipation is the pause between notes. He writes in his Journal in December 1841, just before his brother's death, "Death is that expressive pause in the music of the blast" (JP 1:350). Silence anticipates sound. He says, "If [the writer] makes his volume a mole whereon the waves of silence can break, it is well" (319). Sound and silence encompass one another in the revolution of the seasons, one anticipating the other. If one brother is made silent, the other becomes sound for both of them. "A man may run on confidently for a time, thinking he has her [silence] under his thumb, and shall one day exhaust her, but he too must at last be made silent, and men remark only what a brave beginning he made." The past tense "made" once again links silence to death. All people die and become silent, but even that silence anticipates another kind of beginning, new music.

The final paragraph of *A Week* contains the homecoming. The brothers land their boat in the dark, fastening it to the wild apple tree, "whose bark still wore the mark which its chain had worn in the chafing of the spring freshets." The cycles of one year and one life draw to a close, but this year's freshets anticipate next year's freshets. We can imagine the two brothers, making fast to the apple tree the boat that carried them on a complete cycle, and climbing up the bank into the shadows.

- 1 Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 117.
- 2 Richardson 117. Thoreau's use of the term "denaturalized" is very pointed since he spent the rest of his life writing about himself and various plants and animals being "naturalized"—that is leaving behind the tame state of village life to embrace the potential for wildness.
- 3 Scarlet fever was also known then as scarlatina and bilious fever. We now know the disease was strep throat. Before the days of antibiotics, this could kill a previously healthy child very quickly.
- 4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed., Joel Porte (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 198) 497
- 5 Evelyn Barish, "The Moonless Night: Emerson's Crisis of Health, 1825-1827," in *Emerson Centenary Essays*, ed., Joel Myerson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982) 9.
- 6 Annie Russell Marble, *Thoreau: His Home, Friends, and Books* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1902) 35.
- 7 Robert D. Richardson Jr, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 91-92.
- 8 Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry David Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999) Reprint.
- 9 This is what the transcendentalists—who didn't give themselves that name—called their new philosophy, or as Emerson would succinctly put it, "Idealism as experienced in 1842."
- 10 Critics have usually attributed Henry's presumed guilt to his courting of the same girl as his brother.
- 11 Henry David Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, eds., Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958) 15-18.
- 12 Henry David Thoreau, "Sympathy," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed., Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001) 524-525.
- 13 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed., Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985) 99.
- 14 H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 19-20.
- 15 Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 227.
- 16 Robert Milder, *Reimagining Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 37.

Chapter Two: “I Did Not Cry”: The Sentimental Narrative

This evidence of forethought, this simple *reflection* in a double sense of the term, in this flower affecting to me—as if it said Even I am doing my appointed work in the world faithfully. Not even I however obscurely I may grow amid the loftier & more famous plants—shirk my work—humble weed though I am—not even when I have blossomed and lost my painted petals & am preparing to die down to its root do I forget to fall with my arms around my babe—that the infant may be found preserved in the arm of its frozen mother.

-Henry David Thoreau

I

Though Thoreau often judges antebellum society harshly, he was anything but a hard man. He had a gentle side and often utilized the sentimental tropes of popular culture, but always in interesting and novel ways, particularly in relation to dying. In Thoreau’s handling, heaven became an idealized version of nature, just as the heaven of the Unitarians and other liberal Protestants offered an idealized version of middle-class life. Other sentimental tropes he manipulated for his own purposes were boyhood, bachelorhood, the hearth, and domesticity.

In my last chapter I discussed the tragic early death of his brother John and the effect it had on Thoreau. In one of the headnote poems to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in what is one of his earliest references to heaven, Thoreau asks his brother to be his Muse. He imagines John sailing and mountain climbing in the afterlife, just as the brothers had done in their 1839 trip on the two rivers. In Thoreau’s rendering, heaven holds rarefied versions of the nature they had known together. The mountains are “loftier,” the rivers “fairer” there. And just as the angel brother climbs higher into the heavenly mountains, he never descends rivers, but always ascends. As Thoreau asks John to be his Muse, he intimates that perhaps John will also be his guide when he too climbs loftier mountains and ascends fairer rivers.

A number of years after John’s death, Thoreau wrote in his Journal, “I have heard my brother’s flute.” The use of the present perfect is intriguing. Is Thoreau simply referring to a time

in the past when he heard his brother play, or is the flute he plays himself his brother's? Is this present, remembered, or heavenly music? One could say all three. Thoreau could be playing his brother's flute, and in doing so, remembers hearing his brother play. Remembered music is like an echo, which had always so engaged Thoreau's acute sense of sound, the echo walking the line between what is and what is not sound. Sounds heard at a distance had the same effect on him; the sounds are purified and vivified as they drift across space. The sound of his brother playing the flute, however that sound is summoned, could be an echo carried a great distance, perhaps from beyond the recognized earthly realm. The purity of the sound suggests it has echoed the greatest distance of all, that memory has summoned it from his brother's heavenly home.

John Thoreau was the only human so honored as to have a place in his brother's heaven. For Thoreau, heaven was primarily the realm that elements of nature repaired to after death. In his Journal he writes about a freshwater clam that some animal has eaten, only to reveal the magnificent colors of the empty shell. He says of the clam that after its death the shell's "beauty beams forth and it remains a splendid cenotaph to its departed tenant, symbolical of those radiant realms of light to which [the clam] has risen,--what glory he has gone to" (PJ7: 189). The lowly clam has lofty company in Thoreau's heaven. For example, he famously says in "Chesuncook" that the pine tree he glories in will perhaps reach heaven just as he will, "there to tower above me still."¹ This indicates a hierarchical heaven, and seems to anticipate the heavens imagined by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* or George Woods's *The Gates Wide Open*. Though Thoreau's heaven doesn't contain pianos and good things to eat, or saintly mothers, it is a perfected but recognizable world to him, and one he refers to often.

Walden Pond summons up the idea of heaven to Thoreau with great regularity. He brings up heaven in both chapters on the ponds in *Walden*. In "The Pond in Winter," he sends his

beloved pickerel to heaven: “Easily, with a few convulsive quirks, they give up their watery ghosts, like a mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven” (549). The use of the Puritan idea of translation is interesting here. It suggests that his views of heaven evolved after his brother’s death. In *A Week* he talks about the violent deaths in nature, the “incessant tragedies” and says of the fallen animals “none are translated.” The Christian idea that heaven was established with the translation of Jesus seems transmuted here, that heaven first came into existence with the translation of his brother and now all of nature goes to join John as it is translated.

The purity of the Walden water is also analogous to heaven. In “The Ponds,” looking down upon the pond from the slight elevation of his house site reminds him of looking down on the sky from a heavenly home. From heaven, looking down at the earth’s atmosphere is an experience he imagines more ethereal even than looking down on Walden because it’s divine, though the notion of divinity comes from Walden itself. “It is remarkable that we can look down on [Walden’s] surface. We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of air at length and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it” (473).

II

Thoreau rarely discusses his own boyhood, but when he does, he writes very evocatively. In “The Bean-Field” he evokes the memory of seeing Walden for the first time, when he was four. His family had come from Boston to Concord, young Henry’s birthplace, to visit his maternal grandmother and had taken a wagon to the pond for a picnic. The memory is significant enough for him to note that it is one of his earliest. He says, “And now tonight my flute has awakened the echoes over the water.” Once again, he uses the symbolic ambivalence of the echo to express his relationship with the past. Does his music, echoed back to him, summon the

sounds of that long-ago picnic? His visual memory is also a kind of echo: “The pines still stand here, older than I, or if some have fallen I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes” (446). In this lovely passage he creates a continuity between past, present, and future. He builds a scene that is both enduring and in flux. The fact that some of the trees are fallen introduces dying into the child’s paradise. The fallen trees, however, are nature’s representatives, as their dying precipitates new life. Therefore, the aspect will be similar when it impresses itself on the minds of other small children, who like him, may perhaps alter the landscape as he does with his beans.

In the essay “Huckleberries,” he writes about himself as an older boy, one on whom scenes are not merely impressed, but one who has agency of his own. On a summer afternoon when he was ten, the women of the Thoreau household decide to entertain a guest with a huckleberry pudding and young Henry is sent off to the hills to gather the principal ingredient. “My rule in such cases was never to eat one until my dish was full, for going a-berrying implies more than eating the berries.” Though playful, this passage makes an experience of loss out of the gathering of wild berries. The obvious and humorous reference here is to “going a-blackberrying”—i.e., going to the devil. But at a deeper level, this gathering of berries becomes a metonymy for the very experience of boyhood. Though ostensibly on an errand for his mother and aunts, the boy achieves a firsthand experience of nature that the adults have grown away from. He says, “They at home got nothing but the pudding, a comparatively heavy affair.”² The heaviness of sitting down to a dinner for company cannot compare to the lightness of a morning spent in the August sunshine. Filling his dish is a kind of tithing he does for adulthood; the berries he eats afterwards are all his own. They taste of the solitary joy of the boy on the hillside, where the berries themselves symbolize the gift of a pure and complete relation to nature. Yet the

very act of calling up the memory brings attention to the fact that this particular boy doesn't exist anymore. The boy amid the wild August berries is a perennial symbol, but the boy, Henry Thoreau, exists now only in memory.

Earlier memories of Thoreau's childhood come down to us through the recollections of those to whom he and his family told the stories. His Aunt Sarah Thoreau taught him to walk, and "he was tossed by a cow when he played near the door in a red flannel dress." While living in Chelmsford between the ages of one and three, he chopped off his toe with an ax. Once he fell downstairs and lost consciousness. "It took two pails of water to bring me to," he boasted, "for I was remarkable for holding my breath in those cases." There are another handful of childhood mishaps and an interesting, if true, story of a conversation he had with his mother. As he lay long awake in the trundlebed next to his sleeping brother, his mother said, "Why Henry dear don't you go to sleep?" "Mother," he replied, "I have been looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them." As a grown man he sometimes boasted that when the Reverend Ezra Ripley baptized him, he didn't cry.³

Yet boyhood—and the loss of it—are everywhere in his Journal. In a sentiment he repeats often, he writes on June 9, 1850, "My imagination, my love & reverence & admiration, my sense of the miraculous is not so excited by any event as by the remembrance of my youth" (PJ3: 84). Thoreau has a Wordsworthian sense of childhood, but without the recompense. To him, growing up is merely a prelude to dying. He constantly sees his own loss of youth being reenacted all around him. In the previous chapter I discussed his poem "Sympathy" as an elegy to boyhood. Thoreau wrote that poem in his early twenties, yet the meaning of it stayed with him his entire life. He evokes the sentimental as well as the pastoral, again in June 1850, when he describes boys helping their fathers drive milk cows and their calves fifty miles north to summer grazing in

New Hampshire. He writes, “[e]arly in the morning with their sticks and dogs—it is a memorable time for the farmer boys,” a direct contrast with the death of pastoralism brought about by the railroad in “Sounds.” When the boys and their fathers return for their cows in the fall, the boys “speculate whether Janet or brindle will know them—I heard such a boy exclaim on such an occasion when the calf of spring returned a heifer—as he stroked her side—she knows me father—she knows me—Driven up to be cattle on a thousand hills.” This beautiful description gets a good deal of its poignancy by being tinged with loss. Sending the cattle up the mountains in spring means, inevitably, the fall in both senses and the downward journey. That the heifers, no longer calves, have names and “know me” asserts the individuality of the farm boys and at the same time evokes the experience as universal. Thoreau goes from boys in the plural—will the heifers know *them*—to a specific boy, sure that the calf, now almost grown to an adult—knows *me*. “Driven up to be cattle on a thousand hills,” must end with the herd that descends on the railroad in *Walden*. The family cow and calf become “cattle,” and the farmer boy grows out of his particularity and becomes a kind of “cattle” too. The movement toward the loss of particularity is a kind of dying, a dying out of boyhood because the boys, like the calves, will grow up too and no longer care if heifers recognize them. Their connection to nature will be dying for the rest of their lives. The solitary journal keeper can only record and recreate the vanished experience of the farmer boy.

III

Thoreau didn’t follow the common course when he grew out of boyhood; he never married or had a home of his own. Even the small house he built and inhabited by Walden Pond for two years was on Emerson’s land. As he grew older, the idea of a hearth and family of his own grew more and more untenable to Thoreau and those who knew him best. According to his

sister Sophia, when Thoreau lay dying, Ellen Sewell's name came up. He told Sophia he "had always loved her."²⁴ Thoreau never pursued another relationship after this one youthful disappointment, and one could argue that he didn't pursue Ellen all that arduously. This one archetypal romance seemed to fulfill his imagination enough to require no sequel. Scant evidence exists that family or friends ever tried to get him married to another woman. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case, particularly with Emerson.

In his essay, "Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s," Vincent J. Bertolini asserts that the bachelor identity could present itself as a cover for "anti-domestic male sexuality."²⁵ I propose that Thoreau's position was just the opposite; in his life at Walden and beyond he created for himself an anti-sexual male domesticity. He put this domesticity into practice when he lived with Lidian Emerson and the Emerson children while Emerson was abroad lecturing for nine months in 1847-1848. In November 1847, he wrote to Emerson, "Lidian and I make very good housekeepers. She is a dear sister to me." With Emerson gone, Thoreau has created the perfect domesticity for himself: he is not tied down, and the brother/sister bond between himself and Lidian is asexual. But buried in the middle of the same letter is a "tragedy." Sophia Ford (or Foord), the teacher for the little Emerson and Alcott children, has written a letter proposing marriage to Thoreau. He writes, "Of course I did not write a deliberate answer. How could I deliberate upon it? I sent back as distinct a *no* as I have learned to pronounce after considerable practice." One could say this practiced "no" relates to his well-known contrariety, but on closer examination the context indicates that he is well practiced in saying no to marriage. Emerson, in his response, writes, "It is one of the best things connected with my coming hither is that you would & could keep the homestead, that fireplace shines all the brighter,--and has a permanent glitter therefor [sic]." Emerson represents his friend as the

genius and keeper of the hearth—an asexual if not feminine role. He mentions the proposal only briefly, but vehemently. “You tell me in your letter of one odious circumstance, which we will dismiss from remembrance henceforward.”⁶ Across the years it is hard to determine why this proposal so offended Emerson. Miss Ford was a good deal older than Thoreau, but Emerson’s own grandmother had been ten years older than her husband, Ezra Ripley. Women certainly weren’t in the custom of proposing to men in the nineteenth century, not even progressives like the transcendentalists. Yet though one or both of these factors may have influenced Emerson’s response, I think the main reason for his taking offense was the idea of “my brave Henry,” the man he would later eulogize as “the bachelor of nature,” being domesticated in a way that compromised his stoic asexuality. Emerson infinitely preferred Thoreau to be brother to his own wife than husband to another woman.

With regard to Thoreau as bachelor I must necessarily compare him to the popular author who was arguably the most famous bachelor in nineteenth century America: Ik Marvel (Donald G. Mitchell) whose *Reveries of a Bachelor*, first published in 1850, went through numerous editions and was still widely read in 1900. In it, an unattached young man sits by a series of firesides, imagining courtship, marriage, family, and—most importantly for this study—dying, as he gazes into the flames. A goodly amount of critical work has been done on this fascinating little book, particularly in regards to the liminal status of bachelors in the antebellum period. Like Marvel, Thoreau engages in fireside reveries that end in dying in the notable *Walden* chapter “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors.” Both young men imagine the lives and deaths of families as they sit by their firesides. Each of Marvel’s reveries ends with a deliciously drawn-out deathbed episode. Thoreau more matter-of-factly reports how the families of Walden Woods died out; yet his telling is just as poignant, if not more so, than Marvel’s, and in that sense—

seemingly incongruous for Thoreau—it fits the sentimental narrative. The main difference between the two sets of reveries is, besides Thoreau’s avoidance of maudlin imagery, is that, unlike Marvel, he never imagines courtship or marriage. There are families in his reveries, but no love interests. His fantasies, unlike Marvel’s, are assertively non-masturbatory, though, like Marvel’s, they all lead to death and dying.

Through his anxiety about purity, especially illustrated in the chapter “Higher Laws,” and also evident throughout his Journal, Thoreau indicates his awareness of the transgressive position the bachelor occupied in antebellum culture. A bachelor always has the potential to live out his sexuality transgressively, through masturbation, the services of a prostitute, or the then-nameless sin of homosexuality. Because of his unbounded sexuality, he could possibly be procreative outside the sanctioned bonds of marriage. However, in the sentimental narrative, none of these frightening possibilities exist for the old maid, who, like Thoreau, remains unimpeachably celibate her entire life. Therefore, Thoreau’s self-representation was not as “America’s bachelor uncle,” but rather her old maid aunt. He plays this role in his relations with the Emerson family, his own family, and the feminine manner in which he characterizes himself in *Walden*.

However, Thoreau’s move to the pond was seen as transgressive by his neighbors, as he humorously shows with the many questions he is asked in “Economy.” He is frequently asked, in his suspect solitude, wasn’t he lonely? With Thoreau’s emphasis on purity, he shows he is aware of the masturbation issue behind this interest in his loneliness. The critic Russ Castronovo says, “Breeding fears about the unsupervised habits of solitary citizens, the discourse against masturbation conflicts with the agendas of self-culture which encouraged young men to discard allegiances to dead institutions and live according to the rhythms of nature, as Thoreau did at Walden.”⁷ Thoreau combats these fears by portraying a busily breeding and procreative earth in

which all nature concurrently is mating, dying, and being born, as he integrates himself yet stands alone as the solitary, celibate witness. Animals share his house with him, but nature respects and adorns his yearning toward purity. Of the autumn wasps in *Walden* he says, “They never molested me seriously, though they bedded with me” (513).

Consequently, the similarities of his reveries to Marvel’s serve to highlight their differences. Marvel’s peripatetic character inhabits different spaces for each reverie, including one he shares with a maiden aunt. He spins his reveries over great space and time, while Thoreau sits by the same fire in one house and evokes the past families of the space he now occupies. All of Marvel’s reveries begin with the same transgressive solitary bachelor and they lead to love, families, and dying; Thoreau’s narratives, in contrast, begin with already formed families in which the narrator has no role. With one exception, an old man so tragically addled by alcoholism as to no longer fit into the paradigm of the masturbatory transgressive, all of Thoreau’s characters have families from the beginning.

According to Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, the major tropes of sentimental literature are “the dying child, the destruction of families by death, slavery, poverty, and intemperance, and the unnecessary suffering of marginalized figures.”⁸ Thoreau uses such tropes in “Former Inhabitants.” As winter closes in and his visitors dwindle, he enjoys many evenings by his fireside. “For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former inhabitants of these woods” (526). All these former inhabitants have died, some long ago, some just before his coming to the woods. “Within memory of many of my townsmen the road near where my house stands resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants, and the woods which bordered it were dotted here and there with their little gardens and dwellings.” “Little” is always a key sentimental metonymy in Thoreau. The diminutive is not dismissive (his own house is small) but implies a

smallness that is innocent and unspoiled. He refers to it as “a humble route to neighboring villages.” The use of “little” and “humble” creates a sense of harmless people who lead simple lives and don’t deserve the fates that befall them.⁹ Thoreau of course will tell us in many places he is happy to be the solitary human inhabitant of the woods. But his descriptions of the former inhabitants show a genuine compassion for the loss, suffering, and dying that made his solitude possible.

Cato Ingraham’s former master built him a cabin in the woods. Cato tended a small plot of walnut trees against his old age but, being a black man, had no right to the land he inhabited and improved, and “a younger and whiter speculator got [the walnut trees] at last. He too [the speculator] occupies an equally narrow house at present” (526-527). There is comic equality in death, but the narrative essentially follows the sentimental model of the hard-working former slave whose meager acquisitions are taken from him by a greedy white man. After the reference to the “narrow house,” Thoreau shows the reader Cato’s cellar hole, filled with sumach and goldenrod growing luxuriantly, as though from a grave ornamented with wild flowers.

Thoreau doesn’t tell us if Zilpha had a last name. She too had a little house and was memorable for her loud singing. Her house and all her animals were burned by the British in the War of 1812. Thoreau doesn’t say what happened to her after that, but we know her fate is that of sentimental tragedy. She was known to say over “her gurgling pot—‘Ye are all bones, bones!’” (527). All that remains of Thoreau’s Zilpha are “bricks and the oak copse there.” Of this vital woman we are left with bricks and the memory of bones.

Brister Freeman grew apple trees, some of which remain for Thoreau to sample the fruit, “wild and ciderish to my taste.” This description of the apples has two sides, the obvious being that, with no Freeman prodigy to tend them, they revert to their wild state, hinting at poverty and

suffering. On the other hand, Thoreau says in many places that these are the kind of apples he prefers, ones whose wildness he can taste. This implies a kinship between the two men. Thoreau notes that Brister's tombstone in Lincoln describes him as "'a man of color' as if he were discolored." Like all tombstones to Thoreau, Brister's tells him "when he died, which was but an indirect way of telling me he had ever lived." The only monument to Brister Freeman that reads with any meaning is those "wild and ciderish" apples. "With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told fortunes, yet pleasantly." Even without noting whether the couple had children, by introducing Fenda, Thoreau creates a family. That she told fortunes shows that she helped support her family and the fact that they were "pleasant" means she dwelt on the hopes and longings of her customers rather than on their fears. Most significant is that she was "hospitable." By showing a poor person's kindness to neighbors and customers, Thoreau creates a sense of warmth and community in this doomed family, making its dying out more tragic.

Rather than a few trees, the Stratten family once owned an entire orchard, "long since killed out by pitch pines, excepting a few stumps, whose old roots still furnish wild stocks for many a thrifty village tree." Once again Thoreau personifies the apples, the implication being that he is the "thrifty village tree" enabled by "wild stocks" to perform this act of remembrance. Nevertheless, the orchard proper, like the Stratten family, has reached extinction.

Thoreau begins the complicated story of "Breed's location" with a well-known temperance homily of rum coming to a family disguised as a friend and helper only to lead the family to ruin. Old tradition says a tavern once stood on that spot, but Thoreau doesn't clarify whether the Breeds were the owners or just the hapless customers. He interjects himself into the story humorously: he is nodding off one evening over his studies when he is aroused by the fire bell. He joins the slapstick chase of men and boys trying to find the fire and when they discover

it, they decide it is too far gone for them to do anything but stand around and watch it burn. The tragic note returns when he finds himself in the same location the following night. In a dream-like encounter he meets “the only survivor of the family that I know heir to both its virtues and vices, who alone was interested in this burning, lying on his stomach and looking over the cellar wall at the still smoldering cinders beneath, muttering to himself.” Having been working nearby, he returned to the home of “his fathers” only to find it destroyed. The family itself had already been wiped out by drink, and this last pathetic figure at the smoking ruins of his childhood home is a character straight out of domestic fiction. He lies there staring at the ruins as though looking for “some treasure.” The treasure he remembers, of course, is his family, his younger self, and a time when he and his loved ones still had hope. He is comforted by Thoreau’s presence and witness and shows him “where the well was covered up, which, thank heaven, could never be burned, and he groped about for the well-sweep his father had cut...I felt it and still remark it almost daily in my walks for on it hangs the history of a family.”

Wyman the potter, like Thoreau, squatted on the land. There seems to have been two generations of Wymans, both potters. When Thoreau says they squatted while living, he lets us know that they both have died. As late as Thoreau’s tenure at the pond, a peddler who had bought a potter’s wheel from Wyman the younger stops at Thoreau’s house to inquire about him. In fact, it is while Thoreau lives at the pond that he first finds out about the Wymans, which means they had lived at the pond in his lifetime but died before he ever knew they existed.

Hugh Quoil was believed to have been a British war hero at Waterloo, but if this is really true, then his life becomes one of great irony. He squats at the old Wyman hut and can be a man of gentlemanly behavior. However, he suffers from the final phases of alcoholism. Red-faced, “he wore a greatcoat in mid-summer being affected with the trembling delirium.” He died at the

bottom of Brister's Hill not long after Thoreau came to the woods. "All I know of him is tragic" (530). He goes to see Quoil's hut before it is torn down and gives an inventory of his sad and tattered few belongings. His unhoed garden is overgrown and "The skin of a woodchuck was freshly stretched to the back of the house, a trophy of his last Waterloo, but no warm cap or mittens would he want more" (531). Thoreau's description, though sordid and comic, also utilizes the sentimental in showing us the old war hero destroyed by drink.

He sums up the former inhabitants by describing the small indentations in the earth that mark their cellar holes and the trees that have sprung up where the front doors may have been. "Sometimes the well-dent is visible where a spring once oozed...what a sorrowful act that must be—the covering up of wells! coincident with the opening of the wells of tears. These cellar dents...are all that is left where once were the stir and bustle of human life." Perhaps his most sentimental musing is on the lilac bushes still growing next to where the doors once stood. He introduces children—black children—for the first time in the chapter. Each bush "[unfolds] its sweet-smelling flowers every spring...planted and tended once by children's hands...little did the dusky children think that the puny slip...[would] tell their story faintly to the lone wanderer half a century after they had grown up and died" (532). It is significant that he assumes the black children who tended the "civil" bushes are not perhaps grown to be hearty matriarchs and patriarchs on more fertile soil, but that all have died.

He concludes the section by asking rhetorically why this "small village, germ of something more," has not survived. The soil was poor, the people were poor, many of them were black, and all of them were in some way dogged by tragedy. Interestingly, he peoples the second half of the chapter with his own visitors, once again filling the woods with laughter and gossip. The bridge between the two sections is the barred owl, dozing as Thoreau did over his fireside

reveries. The detailed description of his interaction with an animal joining the two halves of a chapter about human interaction is key, and answers his question. Like the former inhabitants, he too will be gone, was in fact already gone when he wrote this chapter, and the sounds of his friends and him on winter nights will vanish just as the previous inhabitants did. Only nature is constant; only nature remains. In his discussion of the former inhabitants, he repeatedly describes the luxuriance of the wild plants growing in the cellar holes, as though the former inhabitants had given even greater extravagance to the nature they died into. Though he asks to be delivered from cities built on the ruins of cities, he has just spent half a chapter describing the ruins amid where his house stands. Even if he didn't exactly build over the abandoned cellar holes, he tells us earlier, in "The Bean-Field," that in hoeing he digs up tools and arrowheads left by the Indians, a lost civilization much older than that of the former slaves and inebriates. This paradox he leaves for us to resolve: he is living on the site of, if not an ancient city, then layers of ancient settlements. He re-peoples it twice: first with the dead, then with himself and his winter visitors. As long as he continues to write about both groups of former inhabitants, the ruins continue to house human life. He ends his section on the former inhabitants by saying, "With such reminiscences I lulled myself to sleep" (532). By calling his reveries "reminiscences," he collapses the time between his life in the woods and the lives of those now dead. His reminiscences, like Marvel's reveries, keep him company on cold nights, but, unlike Marvel's, Thoreau's dead are not simply sentimental stereotypes, but actual people whose suffering was painfully real.

IV

When Thoreau's sister Sophia sold the family house to the Alcotts and moved to Maine in 1872, she left most of the family's possessions, including her brother Henry's, to the Concord

antiquarian, Cummings E. David whose collections Henry had admired and contributed to during his life. These items were then donated to the Concord Antiquarian Society, which would become what is now the Concord Museum.¹⁰ Among these items is a china figurine that seems incongruous to the character of Henry Thoreau that has come down to us these last 150 years. The figure is a ten-inch-tall representation of Uncle Tom and Little Eva, and according to family lore, was sent to Thoreau in gratitude by a fugitive slave whom Thoreau helped escape to Canada. The man's name is unrecorded, and whether or not the gift was for Henry in particular or for the entire family is not absolutely known, though Sophia said it was specifically for Henry.

Stowe and Thoreau seems an incongruous pair, but the two share more motifs than one would expect. Fire and the hearth play a significant role in both sentimental literature and Thoreau's work, and the convergence of the two is compelling. The open hearth most obviously served as the locus of family closeness and emotional and physical comfort, but burning through the benignity of these fires is always the idea of loss and dying, both for humans and the natural world.

In both *The Minister's Wooing* and *Oldtown Folks*, Stowe laments the passing of the huge open kitchen fireplaces of pre-industrial New England. In both novels she devotes many pages to loving descriptions of the old fireplaces, which ran the length of one wall, were built up with tree-sized logs, and contained nooks and corners for old folks, children, former slaves, and indigent Indians to recline, drink cider, and hear and tell stories. The latter novel, however, written in 1869, ten years after the former, does show some ambivalence about these nostalgically remembered enormous fires that pre-dated the less romantic but more practical iron stoves that replaced them. As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Environmental Imagination*, though Thoreau may have been the most strident mid-century advocate of the preservation of the

remainder of New England's forests, but his was not the only voice. After the Civil War, the rapidly changing geographical and intellectual map of the United States was taking away New England's primacy. One of the responses was a deep nostalgia for the "old ways," particularly in regional writers like Stowe. In *Oldtown Folks*, in a passage in which she describes the massive logs used in such fireplaces, she also describes the family's arguments over the best way to construct the fire. "There is no little nook of domestic life that gives such snug harbor to so much self-will and self-righteousness as the family hearth."¹¹ Stowe seems to be overtly showing yet another example of Yankee eccentricity in an otherwise loving family but perhaps covertly suggesting theological inappropriateness by juxtaposing such expressions as "little nook," "domestic life," and "snug harbor" with "self-will" and "self-righteousness," ungodly traits her Puritan characters were supposed to suppress. Still one could pass over this as just an anomaly if it were not for a later chapter, about a saintly New Light minister who runs a village school high in the mountains. One of the rituals of autumn is for the men to gather and chop down the minister's winter wood. She presents another nostalgic scene of charming eccentrics until she suddenly, in a completely different voice, evocative of Thoreau, laments the loss that inheres in "the prodigality which fed our great roaring winter fires on those thousand-leafed oaks whose conception had been years ago—who were the children of light and of day—every fibre and fragment of them made of the most celestial influences, of sunshine and rain-drops, and night-dews and clouds, slowly working for centuries until they had wrought the wondrous shape into a gigantic miracle of beauty" (Stowe 1345-1346).¹²

The "Housewarming" chapter of *Walden* expresses a similar duality. One can read the coming of the cold months as the ingathering of Thoreau's domesticism, as all but his most devoted visitors or intrepid outdoorsman stay home in the village. He emphasizes that he used

only deadfall and stumps and chopped down no living trees for firewood.¹³ Yet all the same, his presence in the woods caused a diminishment and change in the landscape; even the deadfall was not inexhaustible, and he tells us that in his second winter he used a woodstove since “I did not own the forest.”¹⁴ With that sense of impending loss hanging over his subsequent year, the poignancy of his relationship with fire his first year is intensified.

He shows us that each movement away from the source of fire represents a loss. In November of his first year, he lingered as long as he could on the northeast end of the pond, where the sun was reflected from the woods and the stones onshore. For the rest of his life he referred to this northeast end of Walden as “the fireside.” “I thus warmed myself by the still glowing embers which the summer, like a departed hunter, had left.” The recompense for this loss is the open fireplace of his house, which becomes a special locus of feeling, like the great kitchen hearths in Stowe. He tells us that building his fireplace was the most pleasurable part of completing his house and that he lingered long over it. That fall, Ellery Channing lived with him for two weeks, while he was completing his fireplace and the two men plied their knives together to erect this tangible means of domestic comfort.

Loss always inheres in gain in Thoreau’s solidly built but temporary home. He tells us the house, once plastered, didn’t please his eye as much as before he plastered it, though it made the house warmer and more comfortable. The open fireplace itself becomes companion, “a cheerful housekeeper...it was I and fire that lived there; and commonly my housekeeper proved trustworthy” (523), though not always, as he indicates on the occasion when his “housekeeper” (wife? servant? mother?) throws a live spark on his bed, which burns a spot as big as his hand. One could easily read a cautionary tale against sexuality in this passage, especially after the quest

for purity he just detailed in “Higher Laws,” but in a larger sense it seems to suggest the ever-present close-kin of comfort and living: destruction and dying.

For the moment, however, “Housewarming” keeps that inevitability at bay, and Thoreau and his housekeeper/fire expand their Edenic household. Mice, moles, and squirrels take shelter under his floorboards and the aforementioned wasps come to nest in his newly plastered home. A reader can be surprised by Thoreau welcoming stinging insects into his home, but he shares with them a bond of creature-comfort the same as any human family sheltering together against the cold. Thoreau with his fire and his wasps and his burrowing mammals passes the winter as domestically as the family in Whittier’s “Snowbound.”

Thoreau anticipates Stowe in by ending “Housewarming,” with the poem “The Wood-Fire” by Ellen Sturgis Hooper, which was printed in the first number of *The Dial*.¹⁵ She begins, “Never, bright flame, may be denied to me/Thy dear life imaging, close sympathy.” As in Stowe and Thoreau, the open hearth fire mirrors the minds of the human witnesses. However, this ancient union is becoming a memory, having been vanquished by new, more industrial means of warmth, and she may only mourn its memory. “Was thy existence then too fanciful/For life’s common light who are so dull?/Did thy bright gleam mysterious converse hold/With our congenial souls? secrets too bold?/” (525). However, Thoreau sees dying and loss not only in the vanishing of the old-fashioned hearth or the destruction of the forests; he sees dying in the very wood as it burns.

Thoreau had a long and storied history with fire. Most famously, he and Edward Hoar went on a fishing expedition to Fair Haven Bay in April 1844. Despite his experience in woodcraft, Thoreau started a fire in a tree stump to cook chowder during a very dry spring. A live spark hit the field of dead grass, and the fire could not be stopped. As Walter Harding notes,

“More than three hundred acres [of woods] had been burned over and more than two thousand dollars damage done to the properties of A.H. Wheeler, Cyrus Hubbard, and Darius Hubbard” (160). The village of Concord never let Thoreau forget this. According to Emerson’s son Edward, decades after the fire, idle men in the street would mutter, “woods burner” when Henry passed. Though we do not know if Thoreau wrote about this fire in earlier, excised pages of his Journal, he did write about it at length in an undated passage composed between May 31 and June 4 1850. He says abruptly, “I once set fire to the woods.” After he and young Hoar made their futile attempts to stop the fast-moving flames themselves and with men from the village, he watched “the way the flames went wild with delight—and we felt we had no control over the demonic creature we had given birth to.” After assisting his townsmen for awhile, he retreated to a hillside to watch the progress of the conflagration, rationalizing, at least retrospectively, “I have set fire to the forest—but have done no wrong therein--& now it is as if the lightening had done it. These flames are but consuming their natural food.” He also points out that sparks from the railroad now cause more woodland fires than two careless fishermen ever could. However, this is not his final word on woodland fires. This memory seems relevant to him because at the time of his writing he had just assisted in attempting to put out another fire. One June 4, he writes of the recent fire that put him in mind of his own indiscretion six years before. “As I was fighting the fire today in the midst of the roaring & crackling for the fire seems to snort like a wild horse—I heard from time to time *the dying strain the last sigh, the fine clear shrill scream of agony as it were the trees breathing their last* [emphasis added]” (PJ3: 75-80).

Perhaps these experiences with woodland fires inform his own poem in “Housewarming.” “Light-winged smoke, Icarian bird/Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,/ [...] By night star-veiling, and by day/Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;/Go thou my

incense upward from this hearth,/And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame” (523). This poem not only celebrates fire but mourns and asks forgiveness for the death it has caused. By comparing the smoke to Icarus, the boy who flew too close to the source of fire, he may be referencing the forest fire he started, but he is also mourning the death that inheres in the fire’s flight to the sky, “melting thy pinions.” His beloved fire ultimately blocks out the sun and the living light, and for this he feels his fire is only morally tenable if its very existence becomes a religious exercise: he sacrifices wood on his homemade altar, and the incense he sends to the gods begs pardon for the murder his fire has done.

V

In response to Marvel’s *Reveries*, a very interesting article by F.W. Shelton appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, entitled, “On Old Bachelors.”¹⁶ It looks somewhat playfully at the stigma attached to bachelorhood by classifying bachelors into four categories: the involuntary, the sentimental, the misogynist, and the stingy. Thoreau could be made to fit any of these categories but I think the most interesting comparison for Thoreau, as I stated earlier, is the class of person Shelton defends at the beginning of his article: the old maid. The interesting difference Shelton sees between bachelors and old maids is that bachelors willfully choose their single state; old maids are made, “since God has willed it.” The Emerson letter I quoted earlier seems to imply that Thoreau’s single status was not a willful choice either, but one created, if not by God, then by Thoreau’s natural condition. Shelton says old maids “bloom solitary in a desert world where they are well-fitted to grace a garden of loveliness.” In his solitary life, Thoreau blooms into the genius of another man’s hearth.

Shelton’s description of the old maid aunt’s visit mirrors Thoreau’s place in the Emerson household. “Aunty’s” visit inspires joy among the whole family, particularly the children. They

greet her noisily and lead her—naturally—to the hearth, which is burning all the brighter in anticipation of her visit. She gives the children individual attentions and little gifts that they will remember all their lives. This is remarkably similar to a description of Thoreau’s arrival at the Emerson home. Emerson’s youngest child, Edward, spent many years researching Thoreau, and in his old age wrote a wonderful little book about his own and his townspeople’s reminiscences of Thoreau. His stated goal was to show that Thoreau, despite his occasional brusqueness, was “refined, courteous, kind, and humane.”¹⁷ He talks of Thoreau’s familiarity with the household and how he would arrive unannounced, “[sound] his note in the hall,” and all the children would come running to “hug his knees.” With the children still attached to his legs, he would proceed to the all-important fireplace, “[sit] down and [tell] stories” of wild animals he had seen that day, then “would make our pencils and knives disappear then redeem them presently from our ears and noses.” Finally, he would fetch an old copper warming pan, fill it with popcorn, and shake it patiently over the fire until the popped kernels overflowed the pan onto the rug (2).

This feminizing of Thoreau was something he did for himself. As his own housekeeper at Walden, he creates a bridge between himself and housewives. Notice the subtle switch from female to male in this passage about clutter in “Economy”: “At present. . . a good housewife would sweep out the greater part of it into the dust hole and not leave her morning’s work undone. Morning work! By the blushes of Aurora and the music of Memnon, what should be a man’s *morning work* in this world?” (351). Later he compares himself, not to Ganymede, but to Hebe, “cupbearer to Jupiter and daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, who had the power of restoring gods and mortal men to the vigor of youth. She was probably the only sound-conditioned, healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the globe, and wherever she came, it was spring” (432-433). Here he is comparing himself to a goddess as young maiden, a

prototypical old maid who never ages and gives youth to all. She is a virgin goddess, and the comparison seems to explain why he will remain celibate and why his own people will die out with him.

VI

Thoreau's own people after the death of John and then his sister Helen in 1849 were his parents, his sister Sophia, a revolving door of old maid and widowed aunts, and one narcoleptic old bachelor uncle. With the exception of his parents, all remained childless. This is the family he returned to for good after he left the Emersons in 1848. "Returned To My Father's House," he wrote boldly in his Journal, and for the remaining fourteen years of his life, not counting excursions to the mountains and Cape Cod as well as lecturing trips, that is where he stayed. The family moved in 1850 to the "Yellow House," which Thoreau helped his father renovate. It was a more capacious home than any of the family's previous ones, due in part to the success of the graphite business Henry ran with his father, and later, after his father's death in 1859, with Sophia. Henry had the whole attic to himself, and, finally, he had the privacy to read and write at home, and enough space for his books, his natural history specimens, and his Indian artifacts. The room was double-gabled, and on one side he had his Spartan bedroom and on the other, larger side, his study.¹⁸

His final move home precipitated a change in his relations with his family. Though individual members could still exasperate him occasionally, he increasingly began to use "we," "us," and "our" in his Journal. After Ellery Channing, his most frequent boating companion became Sophia. He nursed his father through his final illness, and his mother wrote, "If it had not been for my husband's illness, I should never have known what a tender heart Henry had" (Harding 408). He shared his intimate musings on boyhood with his family, and once led them

all to a window in the parlor to hear a boy's watermill, which at a distance resembled a tinkling stream. In the eighteen months he was dying, as I will discuss in my last chapter, he grew very fond of his family and domestic life in general. Thoreau seemed to make "home" for himself wherever he settled: in the woods, at the Emersons, and finally, at the home he had sought to escape as a younger man. In time, he made such peace with the domestic life of the Thoreau family that he reminisced about his youth, when he went to church with his family. He writes in his Journal about going as a young man, before he "signed off" from the church at twenty-one, to bathe in the river Sunday morning with the other young men, and then carry sweet-smelling water lilies to church with them. Of course, Thoreau never became a Christian again, but those reminiscences of long-ago Sunday mornings go a long way in completing his reintegration into the family home. A big part of the home for the nineteenth century was caring for and bearing witness to the dying. Both as a witness and caregiver to his father, and later as a recipient of the attentions of his family in his own dying, the prickly Thoreau thoroughly domesticated himself.

He also domesticates wild nature in *Walden* and the Journal. In the Journal, he constantly uses words like "pretty," "little," and "tender" to describe plants, even at his most scientific. The vulnerability and loveliness of the plants strengthen the idea of the willing sacrifice they make to future seasons. The seasons themselves are personified, and each one dies in turn to make room for the next. He never discusses this so poignantly as when he describes the gradual, beautiful dying of winter into the new spring. The animals too have their youth, their "love season," and their dying time. While never abandoning his idea of nature as strange and not completely comprehensible, he also turns it into a beautiful family, one that is always growing, and, necessarily but heartbreakingly, always dying.

The quotation, from an 1851 entry in his Journal, which opens this chapter, is reminiscent of the Scotch-Irish ballad “The Wild Moor,” in which a human mother freezes to death while sheltering her baby from the cold and gusting winds. Thoreau may have been familiar with this song, as it was a popular parlor song in the nineteenth century. But whether he knew it or not, he was familiar with the sentimental idea of motherly self-sacrifice and, in his writings, applies it to dying and rebirth in nature. He also applies this sentiment to spring and winter vegetation in *Walden*, where he says, “When the ground was partially bare of snow...it was pleasant to compare the first tender signs of the infant year just peeping forth with the stately beauty of the withered vegetation that had withstood the winter...decent weeds at least, that widowed nature wears” (569). It is touching that spring, the season of rebirth, is also a season of mourning and that nature herself is a widowed mother in proper mourning attire. Thus Thoreau sentimentalizes the passing of winter into the dying of a generation of nature’s children. He goes further by saying the beginning of spring makes music from the dying of winter just as the first birds sing, “as if the flakes of winter tinkled as they fell!” (569-570).

He notably uses the sentimental motifs of motherhood, infancy, and dying again in *Walden* in his description of the mother partridge and her brood in “Brute Neighbors.” After telling us the phoebe and the robin have built nests near his house for protection, he says the mother partridge comes “clucking and calling” to her chicks “like a hen” then, becoming aware of a human nearby, she utters “her anxious calls and mewing,” drags her wings on the ground, then commences, like an hysterical woman, to “roll and spin around in such a dishabille, that you cannot, for a few moments, detect what kind of creature it is” (503). Thoreau changes the wild creature into the more familiar barnyard hen, and then further domesticates her by describing her in language relevant to a human mother, who is willing to sacrifice herself for her children. He

then turns to sentimental notions of infancy to describe the chicks themselves. At the warning call of their mother, they scatter and camouflage among the leaves, where they will stay if she is killed, until they die themselves. He says he has held single chicks in his hand, and they remain “obedient to their mother and their instinct...squat[ting] there without fear or trembling.” He goes on to further celebrate infancy through the chicks. He says their eyes “suggest not merely the purity of infancy, but a wisdom clarified by experience. Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects” (504). He has domesticated nature again by applying the Romantic paradigm of the wisdom of infancy, as well as the sentimental narrative of the self-sacrificing mother to wild creatures. Both mother and children are willing to die into nature because of the purity of their instincts and the innocence of nature herself.

On September 8, 1851, he talks sentimentally again about the transitions of the year, this time discussing autumn in words that echo Bryant: “May my life not be destitute of this Indian summer...when I may once more lie on the ground with faith as in spring--& even with more serene confidence—And then I will the drapery of summer about me [sic] & lie down to pleasant dreams. So does our life pass into another through the medium of death” (PJ4: 62-63). Once more he is subtly bringing up the idea of heaven—a sentimental trope—and combining it with the mysticism of transition.

The beautiful death is a mainstay of sentimental writing, and Thoreau uses it often in his Journal. Of the winter sky at sunset he writes, “I think you never see such brightness as in the western sky sometimes before the sun goes down in the clouds, like the extasy we told [sic] sometimes lights up the face of a dying man—that is a *serene*—or evening death—like the end of the day” (PJ4: 225). He is reversing the usual simile: instead of the dying man’s face lighting

up like the evening sky, the evening sky lights up like a dying man's face. Once again he is personifying nature through the use of sentimental dying.

The Journal and the rest of Thoreau's work is replete with examples of this sentimentalizing of dying. He sees nature rarefied as a pastoral heaven in the next life and relates dying well to boyhood, bachelorhood, the hearth and fire, and domesticity. The trope of dying well, however, is not limited to the sentimental narrative. Weaving itself in and out of that sentimental narrative, without contradicting it, is the narrative of heroic dying, which is a narrative Thoreau concerned himself with his entire writing life. When he says, early on in *A Week*, that the hero and the maiden love identically, he is putting the two narratives side by side. It is that heroic narrative I will be concerned with in my next chapter.

1 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: The Library of America, 1985) 685. This line about the pine tree going to heaven was removed before “Chesuncook” was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* by its editor, James Russell, Lowell, because of its sacrilegious overtone. This so infuriated Thoreau that he never sent another piece to the *Atlantic* until Lowell was no longer editor and, even then, with the stipulation that any changes in the manuscript had to be approved by him first.

2 Henry David Thoreau, “Huckleberries,” in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: The Library of America, 2001) 491.

3 Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (New York: Dover, 1962) 11-12.

4 Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986) 389.

5 Vincent J. Bertolini, “Fireside Chastity: The Erotics of Sentimental Bachelorhood in the 1850s.” In *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* eds. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999) 32.

6 *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, eds. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press) 1958. 189-195.

7 Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth Century United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 67.

8 Introduction, *Sentimental Men*. 9.

9 In actuality, the former inhabitants of Walden Woods were not seen as harmless by the residents of Concord, and respectable people feared and often avoided the road through the woods. In fact, it was a kind of pastoral slum, something Thoreau was of course aware of. Yet since he chooses to represent the people as the innocent and doomed characters of a sentimental narrative, I will read the chapter that way. To read about the reality of the place Thoreau describes, a good place to start would be: Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and the Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009)

10 David F. Wood, *An Observant Eye: The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum* (Concord: The Concord Museum, 2006) 9.

11 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, The Minister’s Wooing, Oldtown Folk*, ed. Kathryn Kish Skylar (New York: Library of America, 1982) 943-944.

12 Did Stowe read Thoreau? Her husband, Calvin Stowe, owned first editions of *A Week, Cape Cod*, and *The Maine Woods* (the second chapter of which describes in painful detail the “death” of the white pine cut down by loggers). Calvin Stowe passed these books down to his son, Lyman Stowe, and they were eventually donated to the Concord Historical Society, which became the Concord Museum, where they are now on display.

13 This was a practice he continued for the rest of his life, gathering deadfall and driftwood, and digging out old stumps for his family’s winter fuel.

14 The most obvious meaning of this sentence is that the forest, including the deadfall, belonged to Emerson. Though his relationship with Emerson had begun to sour as he wrote the various drafts of *Walden*, I don’t think that

Thoreau is merely talking about deeds and property rights here, but rather how no one man, by possession or location, truly owns the land.

15 Though Thoreau doesn't name her in the printed text, he would write "Mrs. Hooper" after the poem by hand when he gave out copies of *Walden*. It is the only time I know of in which he quotes a woman writer.

16 F.W. Shelton, "On Old Bachelors," *The Southern Literary Messenger* 19. April 1852.

17 Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* Reprint: (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc.) 1999. xii.

18 William Howarth, *The Book of Concord: Thoreau's Life as a Writer* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982)

Chapter Three: Blood and Seeds: The Heroic Narrative

Shall the earth be regarded as a graveyard—a necropolis merely--& not also
as a granary filled with the seeds of life? Is not its fertility increased by this decay?
a fertile compost not exhausted sand.

-Henry David Thoreau

I

From his earliest writings, Thoreau indicated that heroism was on his mind, and that the true measure of heroism, in a man or in nature, was dying well—bravely and cheerfully. The heroism of dying manifested itself for him in his fascination with the vanishing Native Americans and his lifelong passion for the classics. This fertile soil was the ideal ground for Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* to grow into one of his early major influences, as reflected particularly in his 1843 essay “Sir Walter Raleigh.” As Thoreau matured and came into his own as a writer, he turned to nature herself as the truest exemplar of heroic dying. Four late nature essays, “Walking,” “Autumnal Tints,” “Wild Apples,” and “Huckleberries” were taken in part from Journal entries written from the early 1850s. He revised the first three for posthumous publication in *The Atlantic*, just before his death, and had been working up “Huckleberries” as a lecture culled from his unfinished manuscript, “Notes on Fruit” before the final months of his illness. All four essays are prophetic in that they eloquently evoke the summer and autumn features of nature, as they are passing away, and anticipate Thoreau’s own dying.

Instead of being composed intermittently over more than a decade, the three John Brown essays were based on Journal entries written from October to December 1859. The heroic dying imagery in the Brown essays is remarkably similar to that in the late nature essays. The fact that

Brown's raid, arrest, trial, and execution took place as autumn died down into winter was not lost on Thoreau, as the juxtaposition of Brown and the seasons illustrate in the Journal. Brown fulfilled for Thoreau the dream that a man could be heroic in the same sense as nature, but Thoreau's countrymen broke his heart when a "whole crop of heroes" did not immediately sprout when Brown and his men were cut down. Thoreau is commonly believed to have moved abruptly away from Brown shortly after the hanging, but I believe Brown and his late nature essays fueled his embracing of seed imagery, which culminated in his last lecture, "The Succession of Forest Trees."

On Heroes and Hero Worship was published in the United States in 1841, when Thoreau was only twenty-three, and it made quite an impression on him, as well as the other transcendentalists. David S. Reynolds posits that the resurrection of Oliver Cromwell's reputation through Carlyle's books made the later deification of John Brown possible, because Americans came to see Brown as Cromwell's successor.¹ Long before Brown came on the scene, however, Thoreau was moved to write up the life of Sir Walter Raleigh, one of his favorite English poets, and a man he saw as a great, though flawed, hero of English history. Thoreau borrowed two tropes from Carlyle: the flaw of the hero stemming from the flawed time in which he lived, and the greatness of the hero coming from his likeness to nature. He admired Raleigh for his "somewhat antique Roman virtues," and called him "[O]ne of nature's noblemen. Among savages he still would have been a chief. He seems to have had, not a profounder or grander but...more nature than other men."² In one passage, Thoreau likens Raleigh to both a classical hero and a Native American. Raleigh was flawed for Thoreau in that he was a courtier, betraying the natural man in himself for the niceties and flattery of court life. But as a Carlylian hero, he not only represented the worst of his age, he was also a living and dying example of what was

great in his “stirring” age. “The discovery of America and the successful progress of the Reformation opened a field for both the intellectual and physical energies of his generation” (58). In the sense of Raleigh’s explorations, then, Thoreau compliments him by making the courtier into a hardy American. Notice in the quotation that Thoreau puts “intellectual” ahead of “physical.” Raleigh was not just a soldier, adventurer, and explorer; he was also a heroic writer, who composed much of his best work while he was imprisoned.³

Thoreau lingers equally on Raleigh’s heroic writing and his heroic dying. As though anticipating Brown, Raleigh conducted himself with dignity and graciousness while on trial for his life. He spent his last night writing verses and letters of farewell and moral instruction to his wife. Before he was executed, the imprisoned Brown wrote eloquently of the inevitability of abolition as well as letters instructing his wife on the education of their daughters. Brown was noted for his calm and poise on the gallows; Raleigh “went to the scaffold, and appeared with such serene countenance so that a stranger could not have told which was the condemned person” (69). Raleigh grew gardens as Brown would raise flocks, Raleigh “having first introduced the potato vine from Virginia, and the cherry tree from the Canaries into Ireland, where his garden was” (71). Raleigh also showed himself a natural man in his peaceful and fruitful relations with the American Indians, which Brown would also do.

Carlyle’s hero was the opposite of the skeptic. This earnestness spoke to Thoreau, who searched so hard for sincerity in all his relationships and in his society. Heroism, for Thoreau and Carlyle, was not merely a series of actions, but manifested itself equally in thought and morality. “[V]alor is the fountain of pity too—of truth and all that is great and good in a man.”⁴ Though Carlyle would support the American South in the Civil War, his heroic model, particularly in the character of Oliver Cromwell, would inspire John Brown, who kept Joel Tyler Headley’s *The*

Life of Oliver Cromwell on the same shelf as his Bible (Reynolds 164), and would inspire Thoreau to worship Brown as a hero. Thoreau was always on the look-out for a hero's exemplary death; of Cromwell's dying Carlyle wrote, "The sun was dimmed many a time but the son had not himself grown a dimness. Cromwell's last words, as he lay waiting for death, are those of a Christian heroic man" (269). Carlyle's pun on sun/son, would have resonated with Thoreau as nature imagery, for whom always the greatest of men could be likened to a force of nature. The idea of the "Christian heroic man" anticipates Thoreau's own understanding of Brown, who lacked the hypocrisy of all the professing Christians who dogged Thoreau throughout his life and became the one true exemplar of a life based on pure Christian idealism in Thoreau's time.

Thoreau shared a sense of heroic idealism in his understanding of American Indians. In his seminal study on Thoreau and the Native Americans, Robert F. Sayre discusses the influence of savagism on Thoreau's understanding of the Indians. Savagism, "as well as providing fatalistic apologetic for white conquest...also provoked the elegiac impulse. The Indian, the daemon of the continent, must be studied and honored while he is yet available."⁵ "The Indian" in the singular, according to Sayre, did not take into account Indian society, but propagated the myth of the last, lone Indian hunter saying good-bye to his ancestral lands. This was an image Thoreau frequently used, as a fact in itself and as a metaphor for nature, which he believed, was being victimized in the face of a changing American landscape and economy. Thoreau was an elegiac writer, which is one of the reasons "the Indian" appealed to him as a symbol of heroic dying. Sayre talks about the intersection between the Indians and the classics, which would have of course spoken to Thoreau's imagination. Indians, according to Sayre, evoked "pity and censure," comparable to "the classical tragic emotions of pity and terror...Pity was a concession

to the Indian's loss of his lands, his ancient customs, and his former grandeur. Censure was an expression of civilized superiority over this dying race" (Sayre 6). Thoreau does in many places use the savagism notion that the Indian is doomed, but he doesn't necessarily place white economic expansionism in a superior position. Thoreau is drawn to the Indian, who, like the hero of classical tragedy, is destined to die but is an ornament to dying with his calm stoicism. This sense of the elegiac, another form of anticipation as prophecy, permeates all four of the late nature essays. For example, in "Walking" Thoreau writes about the increase in public roads facilitating the marking of private property lines, making walking across lots and through meadows less and less possible in the future. Therefore, he writes, "Let us improve our opportunities then, before the evil days come" (233).

Both the elegy and the jeremiad are evoked in the four nature essays, the three Brown essays, and "Succession," through the use of seed and blood imagery. The Indian is disappearing from the world, and yet, nature, and great men, should leave behind the seeds of their successors. In "Walking" he says, "The seeds of instinct are preserved under the thick hides of cattle and horses, like seeds in the bowels of the earth, an indefinite period" (246). Prefiguring Brown as a kind of John the Baptist, he also writes in "Walking," "In such a soil grew Homer and Confucius...and out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey" (242). In "Autumnal Tints" he says of the red maple that some individual trees are so beautiful that "their seed [could] be advertised in the market, as well as radishes, if we cared as much about them" (374) and the individual tree has "long since ripened its seeds and committed them to the winds" (375). In "Wild Apples" he writes, "that between the rocks you see thousands of little trees just springing up between them, with the seed still attached to them" (454) and he begins "Huckleberries" talking about how men mistakenly refer to some things as "little," others

as “great”: “[T]he famous California tree is a great thing—the seed from which it sprang up a little thing—scarcely one traveller has noticed the seed at all—and so with all seeds and the origin of things” (468). In “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” he writes of his contemporaries who are unmoved by Brown and his men, “Such do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that in the moral world when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable...that when you plant or bury a hero, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up” (402). In “Martyrdom of John Brown” he quotes James Shirley: “Only the actions of the just/ Smell sweet and blossom in the dust” (418) and calls Brown Agricola. “Succession” is entirely a consideration of seeds, and it is where he famously says he has faith in a seed.

Like seed imagery, blood imagery permeates the essays, usually as a symbol of the fertility of the soil. “Autumnal Tints” is full of references to blood. The purple grasses “paint the earth with its blush” (370) and make the ground appear “ensanguined” (371), the sands “impurpled” and he says, “All sap or blood is now wine-colored. At last we have not only the purple sea, but the purple land” (373). The red leaves of the maples and the scarlet oaks reflect the heroism of blood. In “Wild Apples” he tells us that the cattle redden the tree trunks by rubbing against them and that the apples themselves are “freckled or peppered all over the stem side with fine crimson spots” (462). In “Huckleberries” the blossoms are “tinged with red,” (486) and entire hillsides are purple with berries. In “A Plea,” he says Brown’s small, carefully chosen company “sealed their contract with their blood” (398). “No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to” (402). He goes on to say, “The evil is not merely a stagnation of blood, but a stagnation of spirit” (404) and that the affect of the actions of Brown and his men on the North has been to “[infuse] more and more generous blood into her veins and heart” (414). In

“Martyrdom of John Brown,” echoing the sentimental narrative along with the heroic, he repeats the story of the “Boston lady who had recently visited our hero in prison,” to mend his saber-torn clothes and “for a memento, brought home a pin covered with blood” (418-419). In “Succession” he twice uses the image of reddened soil, fertile ground for the seeds planted by nature.

II

In the final manuscript copy of “Walking,” which Thoreau and his sister Sophia prepared for posthumous publication in *The Atlantic*, someone wrote in two places in the margin “Hector.” Hector himself is referred to in “The Bean-Field” in *Walden* but is never specifically mentioned in “Walking.” However, one of the marked passages refers to heroics, Homer, and the superiority of classical literature to even the best of English literature. This is in keeping with the idea of heroic dying that permeates all the late nature essays, the Brown essays, and “Succession.” There are two kinds of dying in Thoreau—the fading of youth into society and a death-in-life shadow, much like the “worn-out ghosts of men” in Homer’s Underworld, and the heroic embracing of dying as natural destiny. “Hector” is penciled again beside “To Americans I need hardly say, ‘Westward the star of empire takes its way’” (238). Here, an evocation of Hector makes sense: the fall of the eastern empire of Troy is predicated on the loss of its greatest hero to the greatest warrior of the western Greeks. But at a deeper level, it resonates, as does much of the essay, with the etymology of “going west,” which as discussed in Chapter One, is for Thoreau associated with dying.

Thoreau tells us he rarely takes his walks in the morning, preferring the afternoon for his sauntering. He may castigate Concord merchants for merely taking the air for a half hour in the early evening, but he says of himself, “In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning obligations” (229). The essay begins with his facetious etymology of sauntering, but there is

always resonance in his humor, and his starting the essay by likening his afternoon walk to a Crusade not only turns his sauntering into a religious allegory, it also implies surrendering this world to stroll unconcernedly and heroically out of it. He begins an early passage by echoing Jesus (and Emerson)—“If you are ready to leave father, mother, brother and sister, and wife and child and friends”—but then completes the thought with the idea that a true walk is a putting aside of the veil of this life and moving willingly into the next: “If you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (226).

Thoreau spoke about “morning work” in *Walden*, but now, as a middle-aged and ultimately dying man, he chooses to embrace the dying of the day. Robert Richardson notes, “He felt himself aging. He found it ‘ominous’ that as he grew older he had more to say about evening, less about morning.”⁶ Several times in “Walking” he relates the meaning of his walks to the Biblical years allotted to a man’s life. “There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within the circle of ten mile’s radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life” (230). One must necessarily see connection between Thoreau’s interest in the end of the day with the inevitable westward course of his walks. The essay’s rhetoric about the westward course of America and civilization seems patriotic, but Thoreau’s patriotism always contains a sting. If Emerson could see in Columbus a representative of the Oversoul’s desire to visualize its knowledge, Thoreau has his doubts. “Columbus felt the westward tendency more strongly than any before. He obeyed it, and found a new world for Castile and Leon” (226).

Thoreau’s dichotomy of east and west is not that simple. He describes two panoramas, first one of the Rhine, then one of the Mississippi. Of the European panorama he says, “They were the ruins that interested me chiefly” but of the American west, “The foundations of castles

were yet to be laid...I felt that *this was the heroic age itself*, though we know it not, for the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men” (238-239). The hero as obscure man recognized only retrospectively echoes Carlyle and anticipates Brown, as well as Thoreau himself, posthumously remembered, but what he does with time is very interesting. Greatness, the hero, can only be recognized prophetically, among either ruins or castles yet to be built, and therefore to go west is a journey which—as with every journey of Thoreau—is primarily psychic. Moving into the future means stepping into a place where what you have just left is seen as a panorama. The heroic was there, only you did not possess the psychic distance to perceive it. Like Hector and Achilles, the hero must die to truly be a hero, and the west that Thoreau seeks is the resting place of the sun, not the gold fields of California.

He associates this psychic west of course with nature. “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild” (239). The Wildness he speaks of is inherently related to dying. “The greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving for immediate use but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation which it supports” (249). Besides his constant fascination with the physicality of dying in nature, he most obviously refers to dying when he predicts the eventual loss of the meadows and forests. But within those meadows and forests into which he walks, there are always echoes of a heroic past that he conflates with a future that can only exist in death. He mentions that at one time the barks of trees were hawked as medicines in the village, but those old first-growth trees are all gone. This leads to an extraordinary image of dying. “The skin of the eland as well as that of other antelope just killed, emits the most delicious perfume of trees and grass. I would have every man so like a wild antelope, so much a part and parcel of Nature, that his very person should thus sweetly

advertise our sense of his presence” (240). He seems to be implying that the man, as much as the antelope, must die to truly emit his sweetness.

Just as each man can have a sweetness under his skin that only dying can release, each person has a secret, primitive heritage that he must die to rediscover. Thoreau talks about the arbitrariness of names, how meaningless they are without their original connection to Nature. “It [a man’s name] does not adhere to him when asleep or in anger, or aroused by any passion or inspiration. I seem to hear pronounced by some of his kin at that time his original wild name in some jaw-breaking or else melodious tongue” (248). This seems to prefigure the “family” he discovers just on the edge of his consciousness and in the middle of Spaulding’s wood lot. “I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether admirable and shining family had settled there...they seemed to recline on sunbeams...nothing can equal the serenity of their lives...there was no noise of labor...yet I did detect, when the wind lulled and hearing was done away with, the finest imaginable musical hum...which perchance was the sound of their thinking” (252). In this family, Thoreau shows us ourselves in our own golden age. The psychic projection into a past of the imagination is most interesting when he says he can only “hear” them when “hearing was done away with.” And what he hears when he thinks of them is their thoughts, which implies a bodiless union of souls, a diffusion of sweetness along with the shedding of our bodies as we enter a golden timelessness that exists only in the “best thoughts.”

He follows this insight with another psychic journey, this time to the top of a tall white pine where he finds “on the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward” (253). The use of “fertile” immediately following the extended image of the mystical family of Spaulding’s farm is significant. He is playing with the idea of generation, and generations, an idea of continuance

burgeoning outside of time, a conflation of generation and dying, which leads him to his conclusion in which he brings together morning and sunset, spring and autumn, dying and rebirth.

Thoreau has a wonderful technique of leaving the obvious to his readers to figure out. He almost always walks westward, he says, but never mentions that he must necessarily walk eastward to return at the end of the day. Instead, he is always heading west, he seems to be implying, as if in each walk he is circumnavigating the globe and his easterings are in fact westerings. This implied circularity would help explain his deliberately unclear geography, and the fact that he sees a “new prospect” every afternoon when he pays his psychic debt and points himself west. This sense of the whole circle of the globe encompassed in one afternoon’s walk he conveys by saying, “Above all, we cannot afford to not live in the present” (254). He disdains the past and future as they occur in clock-time, but instead points at eternal time, with the pine blossoms and the mystical family, who exist not really in the past or present but in all time.

From here he returns to his frequent image of the crowing cockerel. As always, Thoreau associates this bird with spring, and morning. “It is an expression of the health and soundness of Nature, a brag for all the world—healthiness as of a spring burst forth, a new fountain of the Muses to celebrate this *last instant of time*” [emphasis added]. This exact instant—the one that ends as it is realized—is Thoreau’s frozen moment, outside of time. He then puns on his morning imagery, saying he hears the cockerel in “the house of mourning,” setting up his reader for his conclusion in which the day begins and ends in the same instant. The vision that concludes the essay is a realization of the sameness in opposites. He moves from morning and spring to, “We had a remarkable sunset one day last November” (254). At the end of a “cold, gray day” he sees, “the softest brightest morning sunlight...while our shadows stretched long over the meadow

eastward” [emphasis added]. Here is the returning of shadows—the heroic shades—to where they have started. This constant going west to go east, dying and rebirth, “was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but it would happen forever and ever an infinite number of evenings.” West and the sunset are traditional symbols of the end of life, but in an encircling vision of time, the hero’s progress is through dying and out of time. Thoreau shows dying as the ultimate transforming experience, the one that absorbs the walker into the landscape and the hero into his proper sphere in a past that exists outside of time. “The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun at our backs [indicating an eastward progression] seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening” (255), *home* being a psychic space encompassing living and dying, Concord and Elysium.

III

The essays “Wild Apples” and “Huckleberries” at first reading seem to take a different position on dying. They are both examples of pure Thoreauvian correspondence; the wild apples and huckleberries are fading out of existence and being commodified, respectively, both being rejected by his culture that will suffer the most for their loss—Thoreau’s projection of the world’s loss of him. “But I now, alas, speak rather from memory than from any recent experience, such ravages have been made” (450). “Wild Apples” is particularly resonant in the context of biography. In the essay he discusses three kinds of apple trees—the cultivated orchard trees, the feral trees, and the indigenous crab. It is the apple tree gone wild with which he identifies himself most. He writes, “*Our* wild apple is only wild like myself, perchance who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from cultivated stock” (452). His relationship with the crab apple seems to directly parallel the inadequacy he felt about his limited connection to the Native Americans. Just before his death—while putting together the

final manuscript copy of “Wild Apples”—Thoreau put aside a long cherished and deeply researched book on American Indians. His most intimate native acquaintance had been Joe Polis, his Penobscot guide on his last trip to Maine. Emerson said that Thoreau’s esteem for Polis equaled his esteem for John Brown, yet I find in some ways that relationship was not entirely satisfying for Thoreau. Polis taught Thoreau a large vocabulary of Penobscot words and had an almost supernatural sense of direction, but he also complained about working on Sundays, wanted breakfast before setting out to look for Thoreau’s lost companion, got sick, had an insatiable sweet tooth, left matches out in the rain, and lost a foot race to Thoreau. What was admirable in Polis (and Thoreau certainly admired him on some levels), whatever sense of him as the last hero of a dying race, was outside Thoreau’s realm of experience. I find a direct correlation between what he missed in his relationship with Polis, his uncompleted work on the Indians, and his search for crab apple blossoms.

When Thoreau was dying, he was urged to travel to a warmer, drier climate. Southern Europe was suggested, as well as Florida and the West Indies. But he chose Minnesota, which would be cheaper and where he could botanize and gather information for his not-yet-abandoned Indian work. On June 12, 1861, he traveled by steamboat to the Lower Sioux Agency to see a delegation of Plains Indians receive their federal payment. Walter Harding notes, “At the request of Governor Ramsey, the half-naked Indians performed a ceremonial dance... Thoreau... satisfied himself with purchasing three Indian garments of buckskin and a pair of snowshoes.” Harding further notes that a flock of gamblers were also aboard the steamboat and Thoreau was sure the Indians would soon lose their money.⁷ Richardson adds, “The trip was a tragic failure in most respects” (386).

Yet seen in another light, in terms of a crusade, a final quest for the dying hero, the trip was an extraordinary success. Thoreau found his indigenous blossom crab apple blossom; he made his connection. “I never saw the Crab-Apple until May, 1861...[I]t was a half fabulous flower to me...on entering Michigan I began to notice from the cars a tree with handsome, rose-colored flowers...On entering St. Anthony’s Falls, I was sorry to be told I was too far north for the Crab-Apple. Nevertheless I succeeded in finding it about eight miles west of the Falls; touched it and smelled it, and secured a lingering corymb of flowers for my herbarium” (452-453). He gives you the sick man, leaving the cars, leaving the small western town, venturing beyond the Falls, to find this “fabulous” flower he’s been told he’s missed. In this way the hero-as-naturalist vindicates his life; the dying man, holding the withered flower, can go home now, with physical proof of a life lived “deliberately.”⁸

He begins the essay, however, with the orchard. In the cultivation of the apple he invokes not his vigorous condemnation of society, but the human potential for greatness. “It is remarkable how closely the history of the Apple-tree is connected with that of man...indeed in this sense it is the most civilized of all trees” (444). Naturally, the majority of people are not capable of experiencing the apple tree properly. Of the farmer with his wagonload of apples: “I see the stream of their evanescent and celestial qualities going to heaven from his cart, while the pulp and skin and core only go to market” (448). He gives several examples of apple references from Classical literature, pointing out that for the Greeks the word “apple” signified all fruit. This is important symbolism for Thoreau, that something as beautiful as the apple has more meaning as idea than commodity.

Thoreau seems very demanding of his readers in asking us to experience apples in this manner, yet it is not really difficult. What he invokes, as always, is the sense of being ready,

finally, to perceive, to taste, what has always been in one's world. If one eats the fruit with her full attention, removing herself from all social and economic contingencies of an apple or a handful of berries, she can feel the elements of the fruit in her mouth. The first flavor she experiences, along with sweet and sour, is that of leaves, twigs, bark, and soil. All fruit has a background flavor of the entire plant. If she loses all self-consciousness in that flavor, she finds under the essence of plant and ground, that of rain, and finally, as the sugar reasserts itself, the flavor of sunlight. "For nectar and ambrosia are only those fine flavors of every earthly fruit which our coarse palates fail to perceive...just as we occupy the heaven of the gods without knowing it" (448). Once again, as in "Walking," Thoreau presents the possibility that people live in a golden age, but cannot see it for the meanness of their ways, and consequently, the divine is passing away. "For nectar and ambrosia are only those fine flavors of every earthly fruit which our coarse palates fail to perceive...just as we occupy the heaven of the gods without knowing it" (448). But with greater urgency, as in the concluding apocalyptic quotation from the Book of Joel, he insists that this dissolution of the divine is happening as he speaks. According to Ronald Wesley Hoag, "Like the old world apple tree that soon ran wild in the new world, Americans must learn what true nature is and align themselves with it. To do so is to restore or repossess Eden, while the alternative is described in the essay's *or else* conclusion."⁹ There is a quality of warning in the essay, of course, but I think the warning constitutes more of a sense of look now, for this will soon be gone. I see the essay mostly in elegiac terms, both for the apple trees and the man who is giving them to us.

"Wild Apples" offers an interesting insight into why Thoreau as well as the other Transcendentalists, despite their progressive opinions, avoided organized reform movements. Thoreau himself was not a drinking man, and he disapproved of alcoholic beverages. And yet in

this essay, he rails against the temperance movement's role in the demise of the wild apple. "The era of the Wild Apple will soon be past. It is a fruit that will probably become extinct in New England" (466). He then goes on to describe an enormous wild apple tree orchard in a neighboring town that the owner had cut down to prevent the apples from being made into cider. To him, this is an example of society turning against itself. Divorced from nature, society can no longer see the value of its beautiful creation, and kills it without knowing its own loss. Yet in another sense, dying once again asserts itself as a true transcendental experience. As with the freshly killed antelope, apples too must die to emit their greatest sweetness. "For I know that they lie concealed, fallen into hollows long since covered up by leaves of the tree itself—a proper kind of packing" (463). He is making fun of marketing terminology, but is also punning on burial, and the sweetness emitted, consequently, must represent the utter sweetness of spirit.

In a celebration of what is soon to die, Thoreau invokes the taking of sacrament. In the New Testament, Jesus offers the sacrament as a still-living man who will die shortly. The enactment of the ritual would be played for eighteen hundred years until Thoreau adapted it to his own purposes. Yet it is important to note that only the original disciples took the sacrament from Christ's hands. Likewise, Thoreau says repeatedly in the essay that the experience of the wild apple, including the sacramental thawed-frozen ritual, is one in the process of vanishing. Jesus asked his disciples to eat and drink "in memory of me" and Thoreau is doing the same thing. For the final scene in "Walking," Thoreau gives himself a shadowy, unnamed companion. Most likely it was Ellery Channing, but it could have been any number of people, or perhaps no one at all. Unlike the "Winter Visitors" section of *Walden*, in which he gives clear identity to his unnamed visitors, in "Walking" and "Wild Apples" his companion is purposefully voiceless and faceless. I believe Thoreau is suggesting the reader is the companion. When he uses "we" in the

frozen-thawed section, he makes a switch to present tense. “Now we both greedily fill our pockets with them—bending to drink the juice—and grow more social with the wine” (466). In reading these words, the reader is taking communion with the writer (who knows he will be dead by the time the essay is published) and the nearly extinct wild apple.

Not only humans, however, share this sacrament with the wild apple. The apple tree gone feral is partaken of by all creation. “Not only the Indian, but many indigenous insects, birds, and quadrupeds, welcomed the apple tree to these shores.” He lists the various birds that come to nest in the trees—bluebird, robin, cherry-bird, downy-woodpecker, kind-bird, partridge, and owl “warbled in its boughs and so became orchard birds” (446). For Thoreau, sustenance always exists on several different levels, and these wild creatures, in choosing to partially domesticate themselves into the orchard, are all avatars of him. If Thoreau sees the wild apple’s demise coming on the heels of his own, the animals are partaking of both when they burrow and feed in the tree, taking leave even as they are accustoming themselves to the new existence the wild apple has created for them. For Thoreau, wildness inheres in the apple orchard; otherwise it would not have been able to create itself in the wild state. From the bay horse, hound dog, and turtledove of *Walden* to the neighbor’s cow that jumps the fence to swim the river like a buffalo in “Walking,” he is fascinated and drawn to animals’ potential for the feral. Wild animals domesticate themselves far enough to become orchard creatures; the cows that eat from and therefore shape the feral apple trees are taking a sacrament of wildness even as they “cultivate” the trees.

He comically describes cows browsing on young trees, turning the trees into spreading, thorny bushes, sometimes for as long as twenty years, until the trees are able to finally grow vertically from their protected centers, which the cows have created to the benefit of both

species. “The cows continue to browse...until at last [the trees] are so broad they become their own fence, when some interior shoot...darts upward for joy; it has not forgotten its high calling, and bears its own peculiar fruit in triumph” (455). The cows, no longer a threat, can rest in the apple trees’ shade and even eat the apples and spread the seed. In this anecdote, Thoreau is giving us an allegorical autobiography. The cows, the orchard dwellers, are village culture. Thoreau was “held down” his first twenty years, serving his apprenticeship in Concord and Harvard; then his own “interior shoot” was able to “dart upward for joy” and “bear its own peculiar fruit.” The joy is his ecstatic relationship with nature turned loose when he put aside conventional pursuits, and his “peculiar fruit” is the language in which he expresses his joy—for example, the very essay we read. The cows, who started this process, may have been “foes,” but they are harmless now, have become readers who enjoy his shade and taste his fruit. The loss of the spreading bottom, which has served its purpose, is the writer’s body. Instead, his most essential principle survives in a joyous striving into the light, as pure spirit. After his readers have tasted his fruit, he gives them the option of dispersing his seed.

Though “Huckleberries” expresses many of the same ideas as “Wild Apples,” it is different in tone in some respects. Because Thoreau died before he could edit the unfinished lecture for publication, it retains some of the language of the lecture, and he addresses his reader/listener with great immediacy. “I presume everyone in my audience knows what a huckleberry is—has seen a huckleberry—gathered a huckleberry—nay, tasted a huckleberry” (469). The tragic irony of the essay is contained in this statement. He is addressing the last generation to experience huckleberries growing in unlimited freedom.¹⁰

The tension, a familiar one for Thoreau, lies in the ephemeral, spiritual condition of nature (and her lovers) and her consequent vulnerability to an avaricious culture. “[T]he black

ones shine with such a gloss—every one its eye on you, and the blue are so large and firm, that you can hardly believe them to be huckleberries at all, or edible, but you seem to have travelled to a foreign country, or else are dreaming.” He continues to describe the berries with the contrasting adjectives “strong” and “moist,” which sound nearly erotic, a coming together of dichotomous forces that create the world in which the huckleberry is generated. The berries themselves are “eyes” that are witness to the harvesters’ intentions. It is hard to believe the fruit is edible, because something possessed of such a divine nature should not merely exist to fill the belly. The world Thoreau has created for his huckleberry field is curiously divorced from time and place, despite the fact that the preceding paragraphs have given precise dates for the ripening of the various types. Instead, these are pure huckleberries of the mind—they exist in a rarefied world that can only be known by an adult willing to detach himself or herself from the accoutrements of nineteenth-century village life. The woods may be full of berries in July and August, but only the eye that knows what it’s looking for can locate the dreamscape of the berries’ truest existence. Yet he ominously undercuts this splendid vision in the following sentence: “They are a firmer berry than most of the whortleberry family—and hence are the most marketable” (471).

Another familiar theme of the essay is the Native American. For Thoreau, the Indians took their identity from wild nature, like the ancient epic heroes. After describing dried berries on an autumn bush he suggests that seeing the berries thus is what may have inspired the Indians to dry them over smoky fires. Unlike the wild apple, the huckleberry is a truly wild and indigenous American fruit. “The ancient Greeks and Romans appear not to have made much account of strawberries, huckleberries, melons, etc. because they had not got them” (475).

The essay is really a final word on a pun he had long used. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, from the beginning of his career, Thoreau played on the old expression of “going a-blackberrying”—going to the devil—in saying he has gone a-huckleberrying. He says in *Walden* that if the John Field and his family gave up their desire for meat and coffee, they could all go a-huckleberrying together in the summer; in “Civil Disobedience,” when he is let out of jail in the morning, he joins a group of women and children going a-huckleberrying; he and his companions go a-huckleberrying up a mountainside in *The Maine Woods*. To go a-huckleberrying is expressed in the same tone of triumph/self-mockery as his determination to “know beans” in *Walden*. He is thumbing his nose at society’s expectations of him. The image works at the same level in “Huckleberries,” but its scope is widened. He talks at the beginning about what society considers “little things” and “great things.” To leave the world of great things to go a-huckleberrying seems to imply a deliberate shirking of responsibility to follow an eccentricity or immaturity of character—literally going to the devil. But Thoreau proceeds to turn his meaning inside out. If what the world thinks of as little things are in fact great things, and vice versa, then what seems a perversion of character is in fact following one’s own genius, rather than following the devil, and leaving behind the great things of the world is in fact leaving *them* to the devil. This becomes apparent when he talks about Captain Church’s raid in King Philip’s War.

This story comes after several pages’ summery of European observations of Indian preparations and consumption of huckleberries. The point he is making is that white chroniclers disprove their own belief that Indian savagery was apparent in their food—instead they show the Indians preparing elaborate dishes from indigenous foods long before, and independently of, their knowledge of European cookery. But this is simply Thoreau’s initial point. “Captain

Church...came across a large body of Indians, chiefly squaws, gathering whortleberries...and killed and took prisoner sixty-six of them—some throwing away their baskets in their flight” (483). In his own huckleberrying Thoreau makes the point that women and children are his usual companions. Women picking berries is a little thing; men making war is a great thing. In the face of the ferocious attack, the women must necessarily throw up their peaceful baskets. He gives a matter-of-fact and unemotional account of carnage, letting his audience decide if the devil lives in little things or great things, and goes on to give more accounts of Indian puddings made with wild berries.

As in “Wild Apples,” the elegiac encompasses the fruit, the Native Americans, and himself. “The last Indian of Nantucket, who died a few years ago, was very properly represented in a painting...with a basketful of huckleberries in his hand...I trust that I may not outlive the last of the huckleberries” (485). This essay is more directly and less symbolically autobiographical than “Wild Apples.” Thoreau talks about his own childhood and childhood generally. He shows us his own sensibilities growing out of his childhood experiences—suggesting the fluidity of child and adult consciousness in relation to nature. “I have served my apprenticeship and have since done considerable journeywork in the huckleberry field,” he puns. He uses the familiar theme of food taken as sacrament, stating directly: “They seemed offered to us not so much for food as for sociality, inviting us to pic-nic with Nature. We pluck and eat them in remembrance of her. It is a sort of sacrament—a communion—the *not* forbidden fruits which no serpent tempts us to eat” (488). Thoreau’s “us” however, must be defined, because he does show us the serpent in the garden.

The vulnerability of nature is identical to the vulnerability of childlike consciousness. Always with Thoreau, we see what we are willing to see. “Us” is the group of initiates who

refuse to give entrance to the serpent, but the serpent comes nonetheless. Purity is the family that has put aside worldliness and gone a-huckleberrying, but worldliness comes to the fields in the guise of a family. “I once met a whole family, father, mother, and children, ravaging a huckleberry field in this wise: They cut up the bushes as they went and beat them over the edge of a bushel basket, till they had it full of berries, ripe and green, leaves, sticks, etc., and so they passed along out of my sight like wild men.” This is the scene of carnage he doesn’t describe when he talks about Captain Church in the huckleberry patch. The white family and the soldiers are wild men, not the Indian women. This makes us look again at the idea of childhood among the huckleberries, to see that some of the “children” knew the serpent all along. He revisits his childhood again, only this time he widens the picture so it includes not just the solitary boy on the hillside, but a mass of marauding boys. “There was a Young America then, which has become Old America, but its principles and motives are still the same...every boy rushed to the hill and hastily selected a spot—shouted, ‘I speak for this place’...and this was sometimes considered good law for the huckleberry field. At any rate, it is a law similar to this by which we have taken possession of the territory of the Indians and Mexicans” (492).

From this he goes right into his ironic and poignant imagery of the incipient huckleberry industry. The fields are rented out in lots and can only be plucked for profit now. Instead of being peddled door to door by children, the berries are sold from the butcher’s cart. The butcher calls to mind Captain Church’s raid and the rapacious family. Getting huckleberries goes from an act of innocence to becoming synonymous with violence and carnage. “You all know what it is to go a-beefsteaking. It is to knock your old fellow laborer Bright on the head” (493). Of course he is speaking of his compassion for domestic animals, but at a deeper level, the expression “fellow laborer” resonates with the violence men perform on one another. “Fellow laborers” reminds the

reader of the Indian women harvesting berries, and, perhaps, farther south, other laborers in other fields.

IV

Perhaps the most beautiful and elegiac of the late essays is “Autumnal Tints.” What the other essays suggest, this essay fully delineates: that dying can be the most fully realized transcendental experience. Again, a good place to start would be the Native Americans, who were mostly, long before Thoreau’s birth, gone from the Concord area. Thoreau spent his whole life searching for traces of the Indians around Concord, re-peopling his home with them in his imagination. The autumn colors are a vanished race of heroes. Their perfection in memory is reflected by the yearly glory of dying in nature, a reenactment of the instant moment of the Indians’ vanishing. Beginning with the purple grasses, known as “Indian grass,” he says, “The expression of this grass haunted me for a week, like the glance of an eye. It stands like an Indian chief taking a last look at his favorite hunting-grounds” (373). Thoreau adds to the stock figure of the last, lone Indian the frozen moment of parting in keeping with nineteenth-century deathbed vigils, and the Indian chief, as Thoreau will be in his own dying, at that instant looks back rather than ahead, and lives completely in the moment of perfect separation, of dying unencumbered by a notion of time implied by staring ahead into the moment of being dead. “[The grasses] take you by surprise...thus early in the season, as if they were a gay encampment of red men, or other foresters, of whose arrival you had not heard” (374). Autumn comes as a half-known memory of the golden age, the red foresters an idea peopling the tall grasses, much like the mystical family in “Walking” exists outside of time.

“Autumnal Tints” is full of martial imagery. Of the red maple: “I am thrilled by...it, bearing aloft its scarlet standard for the regiment of green-clad foresters” (374); of the fallen

leaves: “Some trees, as small hickories, appear to have dropped their leaves simultaneously, as a soldier grounds arms at a signal”: and in the voice of the scarlet oak, “I bring up the rear in my red coat. We scarlet ones, alone of the Oaks, have not given up the fight” (390). But it is important not to interpret this imagery in relation to the war that was taking place at the time of his final revision; he makes clear that the tawdry patriotism of the Union at the present moment is not his concern. Rather, he is talking about the classical ideal of heroism that cannot exist in the present because it exists outside of time. His full-leafed heroes, like his John Brown, are immortal, and infinitely superior to the moment. “Shall that dirty roll of bunting in the gun-house be all the colors a village can display?” (386).

Relevant to the frozen instant of dying is the temporality of autumn. It is significant that the scarlet oaks in the above quotation are fighting a battle in a war already lost. It is the transitional moment between life and death that concerns Thoreau. Autumn is a process that only pauses in the writer’s imagination. For example, Thoreau is fascinated by the after-image of trees on the ground just after all the leaves have fallen, and describes this phenomenon several times: “I would rather say that I first observe the tree thus flat on the ground like a *permanent* colored shadow [emphasis added], and they suggest to look for the boughs that bore them” (378). Of course the colored shadow, like any shadow, is not permanent, except in memory, because an afternoon breeze will quickly disperse it. Instead, the leaves on the ground encourage one to look at the now denuded boughs—another act of imaginative memory. In his autumn trees Thoreau juxtaposes the joyous and the somber. “So they troop to their last resting place, light and frisky... Merrily they go scampering over the earth” (381). He notes that birds’ nests, perennial symbol of spring and new life, are being filled with withered leaves. To accept as your fate one instant of glorious color, then quickly wither away to shadow and memory is the heroic embracing of

dying, the same death that Achilles chooses: “What good’s to be won from tears that chill the spirit?/So the immortals spun our lives” (Iliad 24: 612-613).

There is an unlikely hero in the classical mode in “Autumnal Tints,” drawn so quickly and with such Thoreauvian irony that a careless reader can miss him. But the careful reader will come back to him again and again, as another human link—like Thoreau himself—between nature and John Brown. In the Sugar-Maple section he writes of the maples: “They are worth more than they have cost—though one selectman, while setting them out, took the cold which occasioned his death” (383). The village selectmen are usually lambasted by Thoreau as Pharisees, even in the same essay, for their disregard of nature except for its monetary value. Yet in one, unnamed selectman, he shows us someone who willingly and beautifully giving his life for a principle. Setting out young trees is the equivalent of burying seeds in the ground against the future, and for this future the selectman gave his life. And it is interesting to note that Thoreau himself, in early December, 1860, took a chill that brought on his final illness while outside on a raw day counting tree rings.¹¹

“Autumnal Tints” makes the most obvious use of classical imagery in the Fallen Leaves section. Thoreau inverts Virgil’s (and Dante’s) simile of the souls gathering on the shores of Acheron: “As many souls/As leaves that yield their hold on boughs and fall/Through forests in the early frosts of autumn” (Aeneid VI: 418-420), to turn the leaves back into souls: “[I] reach a quiet cove, where I unexpectedly find myself surrounded by myriads of leaves, like fellow voyagers” (380). He even refers to himself as Charon. This inversion of a famous epic simile implies a fluidity between myth and reality, the shadowy past and the present reality. The opportunity to sacrifice one’s life beautifully and meaningfully always has, and always will, exist. “[The leaves] that have flown so loftily, how contentedly do they return to the dust again,

and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of a tree, and afford nourishment to new generations of their kind, as well as to flutter on high! They teach us how to die” (382).

Among Thoreau’s most ecstatic nature writing is the final section of the essay, The Scarlet Oak. In it, he again communicates his transcendental vision of the old Puritan idea of translation, that fluid instant where the body gives way to the spirit. He does an astonishingly close reading of the leaves themselves. “They have so little *terra firma* that they appear melting away in the light and scarcely obstruct our view” (387). “Our view” is of the sky and the light. Like the long shoots of the wild apple, they aspire to the light, and further, become part of the light, stopped in the instant of transition from one state to another. “Lifted higher and higher, and sublimated more and more, putting off some earthiness and cultivating more intimacy with the light, they have at length the least amount of earthy matter, and the greatest spread and grasp of skyey influences. There they dance, arm in arm with the light” (387-388). What creates the poignancy of the scarlet oaks is that they are the last leaves to change color, and they reflect the whole history of autumn in their experience of it. And, as always with Thoreau, only the mind prepared to see is the one that creates the eye with which to see. Many people only see gray in November, the end of autumn, when in fact the brightest colors now appear. Yet these brilliant back-lit reds are suffused with shadow, and one can only truly see them from some distance. The function of memory is necessarily to stand back, and see holistically, which is not possible deep inside the actual experience. It is the act of dying that gives the final, passionate surge to the leaves’ last days and—slim and aerial as their physical state is—it is the idea of the leaves which makes the greatest impression. “The very rails reflect a rosy light at this hour and season. You see a redder tree than exists” (392).

An essay that has nothing to do with war but uses martial imagery throughout ends with a hunting simile. Thoreau has prepared us for this ending by his continual reference to the evergreens as foresters. The tragic beauty of the dying leaves can only exist amid the perennial greens of the pines. What the hunter “kills,” however, is not a bird, but what Thoreau refers to in “Walking” as “our winged thoughts.” The very idea of autumn, the frozen but therefore perpetual idea of transition, is what the good hunter can only get in his sights by a strong enough desire to experience it. “The Scarlet Oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads—and then we can hardly see anything else” (393). Like Emerson’s “always becoming,” the instantaneous and the rare are in fact constantly before us, but we cannot experience them until we have traveled the right psychic distance. “These bright leaves which I have mentioned are not the exception, but the rule; for I believe that all leaves, even grasses and mosses, acquire brighter colors before their fall. When you come to observe faithfully the changes of each humblest plant, you find that each has, sooner or later, its peculiar autumnal tint” (395). I find it impossible to read this passage and think that Thoreau had forgotten his rarefied idea of John Brown when he returned to nature writing—instead, like the oak leaves, Thoreau has “sublimated” the idea, “putting off some earthiness and cultivating more intimacy with the light,” because, in his vision, Brown, like the autumn leaves, is forever frozen in the instant between living and dying, teaching us how to die.

V

One of the great themes in Thoreau is that of maturity—its equivalent in nature being ripeness. *A Week* ends on the cusp of the transition from summer to autumn, and the imminent separation of the brothers is a kind of dividing of the spirit from the body. In “Higher Laws,” he talks about it being natural for boys to go into the woods with guns, but if they really become

men, they put aside their guns and hunt ideas with their senses and perceptions. From his early career to his late, Thoreau moved meanderingly from spring to autumn, morning to evening. The four essays I've discussed treat late summer and autumn with a Keatsian sensuality. It is as though all of nature and all of man's possibility husband themselves for a final and infinite moment of perfect dying. Though this movement toward perfection is everywhere in nature if one is willing to experience it, in a man its existence is as miraculous as the colors of autumn if they occurred only once in centuries. This idea of the heroic exemplified in a truly natural man is ultimately how Thoreau viewed John Brown. Brown became Thoreau's heroic *logos*—no longer an individual, or even human, he becomes the language of nature.

Why Thoreau chose Brown as his representative of absolute heroism in dying is related to the way Thoreau saw himself. Beyond the obvious biographical similarities—both of them New England surveyors with a distaste for fancy dinners—is the sense that both were extraordinary, yet at the same time ordinary men, who knew the proper time to die and therefore lived by nature's designs. Brown became for Thoreau representative of an idea (which he tells us several times in "A Plea") and this is why the actual politics behind Harpers Ferry ultimately didn't matter to Thoreau. This idea is not new to Thoreau's thinking, but he chooses Brown as the one human representative of the magnificent order of creation. In the gaunt old man from Connecticut he sees, not the vigilante, but the scarlet oak. The greatest good a man can do is to die for a principle, which is the equivalent of dying at the proper moment of ripeness.

This is not to say Thoreau didn't care about anti-slavery activism—quite the contrary. Slavery represented for him the great moral failure of his country, both South and North, and he had long been impatient with the pusillanimity of Northern abolitionists. In fact, Philip Cafaro notes, "In defending Brown, Thoreau reiterates points made in his earliest anti-slavery pieces.

Illegal acts are justified in opposing slavery. What is new is his treatment of heroism: the rare irruption of virtue in the political realm...by dying for their principles, Brown and his men give concrete proof that each of us may sacrifice for higher ideals.”¹² This is the core of Thoreau’s faith in Brown’s failed mission. Like nature, heroism should be a process; the example of Brown and his men should be like good seeds planted in the earth.

In “Autumnal Tints” Thoreau says, “For aught we know, as strange a man as any of these is always at our elbow,” (394) which resonates with “A Plea,” in which he says, “But let some significant event like the present occur in our midst, and we discover, often, this distance and strangeness between us and our nearest neighbor” (404). This sense of the uncanny is pervasive in Thoreau. The “stranger” in “Autumnal Tints” refers to perspective. He imagines a group of absolutely dissimilar men studying the same autumn prospect—the selectman (not the one who set out the maples) is thinking of property values and boundaries. Working from “a man sees what concerns him,” he leaves us to imagine how his three other hypothetical gazers see themselves reflected: presumably, Swedenborg sees the mystical, the Feegee-Islander the wild, and Julius Caesar the heroic, all three representing a symbiosis of Thoreau’s vision of nature and himself. The strangeness comes from no man being able to comprehend completely the vision of another man, and how he sees himself in relation to nature. In “A Plea,” the strangeness is an expansion of this—you don’t ever truly know your neighbors—you may chide and castigate them your entire life, but they still surprise you by looking upon what you look upon and seeing something entirely different. “It is the difference of constitution, of intelligence, and faith, not streams and mountains, that make impassable boundaries between individuals and between states. None but the like-minded can come plenipotentiary to our court,” (404) *our* court of course having nothing to do with the military court at Harpers Ferry, but the vision of the like-

minded. Thoreau looks at the landscape as a compendium of the mystical, the wild, and the heroic, and sees Brown by the same lights. Yet his ridiculous neighbors only see a lunatic—just as they only see the crank in Henry Thoreau and money in the landscape. All that is rich and meaningful is lost on his neighbors, and Thoreau is furious.

One cannot examine “A Plea” without noticing that Thoreau refers to Brown in the past tense even though he was still alive at the time Thoreau first gave the address, and never, in any of the three essays, does he describe the hanging, despite Brown’s great courage on the gallows. This omission recalls another of the ancient Greek authors Thoreau held dear: Aeschylus. In the *Agamemnon*, the Chorus describes in graphic detail the events leading up to the death of Iphigenia, but never describes the actual sacrifice. We see her hoisted onto the altar, and then the Chorus stops—they cannot describe any further. So in a sense, the act is never completed, and the girl, forever suspended at the moment she is about to be sacrificed, hangs over the entire trilogy. She is being killed, but she is never allowed to die. Thoreau uses this technique for his trilogy of Brown essays. Never allowed to actually die, Brown is everywhere and nowhere, not alive or dead, but always in the moment of translation—immortal. “This morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung...he is not Old Brown anymore; he is an Angel of Light” (416). He is an angel of the same light into which both the scarlet oak and the wild apple strive, the same light that bathes a hillside on a November afternoon.

In “A Plea,” Thoreau says, “I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life but for his character—his immortal life” (416). Brown’s immortal life, like the immortal life of nature, is the significant organizing principle in all three essays. He says some extravagant things about death and dying in “A Plea,” but as Reynolds notes, “Perhaps ‘the living North’ appreciated Brown, but Thoreau knew well that not all the North was living, in his sense of the

word” (432). Of Brown’s raid Thoreau says, “This event advertises me that there is such a thing as death—the possibility of a man’s dying. It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die, you must have lived.” Like the autumn leaves, Brown and his men “in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live” (414). Always in the process of dying, Brown is the great human exemplar of life in nature. In “Martyrdom,” he addresses the dead Brown, “You, Agricola, are fortunate, not only because your life was glorious, but because your death was timely” (420). Yet by the time he comes to “The Last Days of John Brown,” a speech he composed six months after Brown’s death, Thoreau is saying that Brown has never died at all. He says of himself that he “commonly attend[s] more to Nature than to man, but any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects.” Yet he goes on to say that when he sees a familiar bird “still diving quietly in the river...it suggested that this bird might continue to dive here when Concord is no more” (422). He is pointing directly to eternity—just as nature shall outlive the petty world of Concord, so Brown’s immortal heroism will outlive the disreputable time of American chattel slavery. He concludes the essay by saying Brown never died at all. “I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than he ever was. He has earned his immortality” (428).

Immortality is the great characteristic Brown shares with nature. Always Thoreau emphasizes Brown’s closeness to nature. Both in “A Plea” and in the Journal he mentions the close relations Brown formed with the Indians. On December 3, 1859 he wrote, “When I heard of John Brown and his wife weeping at length, it was as if the rocks sweated.” Thoreau is acutely aware in his Journal of the fact that Brown is dying at the same time as the year. On November 15 he writes about the plentiful seeds of the white pine and shagbarks “still hung on the trees, though most had fallen.” He makes this observation in the middle of his complaint that

Massachusetts was “not taking any steps for the defense of her citizens who are likely to be carried to Virginia as witnesses, and exposed to the violence of a slaveholding mob.” In his greatest rush of words about Brown’s heroism in the face of an unheroic and prosaic north, he pauses to say on November 28, “This has been a very pleasant month, with quite a few Indian-summer days.” The people around Thoreau are reactionaries and Thoreau himself battles daily with impatience and rage, but Brown and nature maintain the same serenity, the same acceptance, the same faith, the same sanity. (J XII: 400-458)

Thoreau concludes “The Last Days” by saying Brown “is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land” (428). At the beginning of that paragraph he says nothing about Brown’s actual death, but instead refers to “the day of his translation.” Like the animals and the trees, Brown is translated to a higher heaven and earns his immortality.

VI

One wonders, if Thoreau had lived through the Civil War, what his opinions would have been on Emancipation, the uptick in Union aggressions and victories, and the fact that so many Union men fought and died so courageously for a principle. Would he have felt that the buried seeds of John Brown and his men had borne good fruit? Certainly Emerson believed so. But during Thoreau’s final months and the first year of the War he was unimpressed. He wrote nothing in his Journal about the war. The only known place where he mentions it is in a letter to Franklin Sanborn he wrote from Minnesota. “I am not even so well informed as to the progress of the war as you suppose,” saying that he’d only seen one eastern paper—the abolitionist *Tribune*—in five weeks. He goes on to say, “The people of Minnesota have *seemed* to me more cold—to feel less implicated in this war than the people of Massachusetts.” There seems to be a

touch of pride for his home state in the feeling that it shows for the War, though he does mention that when Union volunteers departed a few days previously from Redwing, he heard there had been much weeping, though he ironically notes that there was little weeping when the regulars were sent out to fight the Indians. This is all at the beginning of the letter—the bulk of it describes his visit to the Lower Sioux Agency.¹³

Botany, and not the war, was predominate in Thoreau's mind in the last year of his life. On March 12, 1862 he wrote a response to a January letter from an admirer, Myron Benton. "[I]f I were to live, I should have much to report on Natural History generally" (641). The only mention of Brown comes in a letter of March 30, 1862, not from Thoreau, but from his New Bedford friend and correspondent, Daniel Ricketson. "Two young men in a buggy-wagon have just driven up the road singing in very sonorous strains the 'John Brown' chorus. I wish its pathetic and heart-stirring appeals could reach the inward ears of Congress and the President" (644). At this point Thoreau could no longer answer letters, and his sister Sophia was writing to his correspondents. Though as committed an abolitionist as the Quaker Ricketson, Sophia makes no mention of Brown or his song in her response.

However, I don't believe Thoreau's passionate feelings about Brown and his men simply vanished, but were translated into his last great natural history passion: seeds. An enthusiasm for seeds was not new to Thoreau in the last years of his life, because a fascination for material and symbolic seeds was always part of his thinking. He was writing about the seeds of beans and the seeds of virtue in *Walden*. As I have pointed out, seed imagery permeates the four nature essays I've discussed, as well as the Brown essays. But by the end of his life, Thoreau's lifelong fascination with seeds blossomed into powerful insight and understanding, to the point where

much of what he'd written about seeds and forest trees anticipated *Origin of the Species*, which was published in the United States in 1860.

“The Succession of Forest Trees” was culled from a work Thoreau didn't live to complete, *The Dispersion of Seeds*.¹⁴ Until recently, the essay has gotten very little critical attention. As Laura Dassow Walls says, “[T]he text in which he most fully negotiated the difficult passage between poetry and science has fallen between them into obscurity.”¹⁵ Traditionally, Thoreau critics had put little stock in Thoreau's science, and his late work generally, but that has changed in the last few decades. The scientific accuracy of his late work is now generally accepted, and his detailed observations on flowering and leaf-out times, bird arrival dates, and ice-out dates are being used to track climate change in eastern Massachusetts. However, “Succession” has not been seen as a prophetic essay like his other late nature essays, and no one has connected it to the John Brown essays. Giving “Succession” as a lecture for the Middlesex Agricultural Society at Concord Town Hall in September, 1860, almost a year after Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, Thoreau facetiously introduces himself as a Transcendentalist at a cattle show. He says, “Every man is entitled to come to Cattle-shows,” (429) just as he opens “A Plea” with “I trust you will pardon me for being here” (396). In both instances he introduces a prophetic talk with mock humility. “A Plea” is an entreaty for the reputation of Captain John Brown; “Succession” is an entreaty for the reputation of seeds. Brown and seeds are both responses to particularly ridiculous claims: that slavery will go away peacefully and that trees are spontaneously generated when woods are cut down. Freedom cannot be spontaneously generated any more than trees can.

The birth of trees in “Succession” is predicated on the dying of forests and animals, and therefore, along with the prophet-naturalist speaker, the hero of the essay is nature. Like the

Brown essays, “Succession” has a very strong first person narrator. As Walls notes, “Throughout ‘Succession’ he insists on foregrounding his own role as agent, both in the field and at the podium” (203). He begins with images of Biblical prophecy, including the walking staff and the ram’s horn and then says, “Let me lead you back into your wood-lots again” (430). He has led himself back to the woodlots after his country crushed him in his expectations for Brown’s legacy, and he has returned, like Jesus after his forty days in the wilderness, to preach what he has learned. The farmers in his audience are unsure why pine woods spring up when hardwoods are cut down, or vice versa. They have rather fantastic beliefs of how this “crop rotation” occurs—it is Thoreau’s responsibility to be their eyes and truth bearer. The most obvious fact is the most remarkable: though slips and cuttings may be used in orchards, in nature all trees come from seeds. The role of the prophet “remains only to show how the seed is transported from where it grows to where it is planted” (430).

He begins with the pines. The pine seed is designed in such a way, light, and has a handle, so that “it is then committed to the wind, expressly that it may transport the seed and extend the range of the species” (431). This doesn’t just anticipate Darwin, but shows the heroic qualities of nature. The seeds are nature’s avatars and children; they fly off as bravely and cheerfully as the autumn leaves and Brown’s men, most of them to their death. If they aren’t digested by the animals, or fall on infertile ground, many will be choked out in their first years by want of light. On the other hand, acorns and other nuts, carried by birds and quadrupeds, sprout up in pine woods. Most venturers into a pine woods would only see the pines, but with the right “intention of the eye,” Thoreau sees the little oaks among the pines. When the pine forest is cut down—killed—what was obvious only to Thoreau becomes apparent to all. This destruction

is the same as in “Huckleberries”—when woods are cut down or burned, bushes spring up to feed birds and people. So man is made to participate in the resurrection carried on by nature.

Only Thoreau, as prophet of nature, can interpret this parable of seeds for his audience. Something as mundane as crop rotation is turned into prophecy when conducted by nature. One species takes its slim chance for the sake of its own kind, while another heroically offers its life for another species. The point is that for this resurrection in the wood lot to occur, an entire troop of one species must die. “We send a party of woodchoppers to cut down the pines, and so rescue an oak forest” (436). Just as the seeds are nature’s avatars, so are her creatures. “The squirrel was then engaged in accomplishing two objects, to wit, laying up a store of Winter food for itself, and planting a hickory wood for all creation” (434). The squirrel is nature’s emissary in that its death can propagate an entire forest. This gives the squirrel a semi-divine autonomy so it can accomplish nature’s ends. If the squirrel is killed by an animal or human predator, a whole brave troop of hardwoods will spring up, reminiscent of “Autumnal Tints” and “A Plea.” The little hardwoods planted by the martyred squirrels will die too if the pines are not cut down, but “they do better for a few years under their shelter than they would anywhere else” (435). The pines become nature’s nurses, and she utilizes her pines to nurse her oaks. When it comes time for the pines to die, they do so after fulfilling their destiny and give their lives for a new species.

He then goes on to discuss how the British have been using pine woods as a nursery for young oak trees, but they are “merely adopting the method of Nature, which she long ago made patent to all” (436). The British, then, have the run on the Americans when it comes to their methods of propagating trees, but they come nowhere close to nature herself, who is the “patent office at the seat of government of the universe.” He is using the language of agriculture prophetically, saying that far above nursery men and wood lot owners is absolute, deified nature,

who long ago perfected the seed. “So when we experiment in planting forests, we find ourselves at last doing as Nature does. Would it not be well to consult with Nature at the outset? for she is the most extensive and experienced planter of us all” (438). Nature may be considered the opposite of culture, yet she actually far exceeds mankind in agriculture.

He tells another parable, the parable of the squirrel hunter. This man told Thoreau he took himself to a walnut tree “which bore particularly good nuts, but in going to gather them one Fall, he found that he had been anticipated by a family of a dozen red squirrels.” The tree was hollow and the hunter gathered “a bushel and three pecks. . .and they supplied him and his family for the Winter” (439). So the squirrel hunter was actually hunting the squirrels’ *food* which they had gathered for their winter store. The squirrel hunter robs the squirrel family to feed his own family. Man and squirrels become equals as they vie for the same winter store—the squirrels actually anticipate the winter for the man, who comes perhaps to kill squirrels but instead discovers a great bounty laid by.

After disproving the notion that acorns and other nuts can lie dormant in pine woods for an indefinite period and still maintain their vitality, he then goes on to show how certain seeds in fact *can* lie dormant in the soil for centuries, only to germinate into the light when they have the opportunity, particularly small seeds. When the Hunt House in Concord was taken down, Thoreau discovered 1703 etched into the chimney but concluded that was the newer part of the house and the other section could have been up to a half a century older. When the cellar was uncovered, several weeds that were unknown in the vicinity came up, as well as tobacco, which was once cultivated in the Concord area. “The cellar had been filled up this year, and four of those plants, including the tobacco, are now again extinct in that locality” (442). Nature, using

man as her agent, operates in slow time, letting centuries lapse between dying and rebirth, but only her existence makes that rebirth a possibility.

The essay nears its close with the anecdote of the *Poitrine jaunne gross*, the giant yellow squash he grew from the French seeds of a plant indigenous to America. These squashes ended up weighing hundreds of pounds, and a man who bought one of them planned to sell the seeds for ten cents apiece. Thoreau says they grew “in that corner of my garden,” and the reader comes to see that the corner is that which welcomes the prophetic seeds of nature. Eventually, the entire garden is filled with crops. These crops represent a mystical transformation of the private garden of his mind to all of nature. Emphasizing the mysticism of nature, more incomprehensible even with vigorous study and great reverence than through idle supposition, he shows us the miracle of the seed. He says, “Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. . . . Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders” (442). Here he re-invokes his expectations for John Brown, only now moved from the temporal to the eternal rhythms of nature.

If people could perceive nature in a like manner, the whole world would be recognized as the garden it is, but he ends, “Surely men love darkness better than light” (443), prophetic language that echoes all the late essays. Yet it is significant that even though he concludes in the voice of the jeremiad, his final word in the last essay he composed is “light.” The traditional image of death is darkness, but just as the blessed in Dante’s paradise exist at the source of all light, a proper transcendental dying is a stepping into the light, be it the light that dances with the scarlet oak leaves, the light the wild apple springs up joyfully into, moonlight on a summer night, the “morning light” of an autumn afternoon, the minute blossoms of the white pine pointing toward the light of heaven, or the now immortal John Brown working in public, “in the clearest

light that shines on this land.” The dark of the grave, or the minds of little men, is the absence of light, but the pure idea, the graceful procession of the seasons, the life laid down for a principle, are all a yearning into the light. The audience for “Succession,” which doesn’t see the heroic natural world, dying and striving into the light all at once, doom themselves to a cowardly darkness when, in fact, they too could live fully and die heroically into nature, living in the light and dying willingly so that others may strive into that same light.

- 1 David S. Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2005) 19.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001) 57.
- 3 Interestingly, though Thoreau mentions Raleigh's most famous and perhaps best poem, "The Soul's Errand" in his Raleigh essay but he doesn't quote it. He does however, some years later, quote it in full in "Martyrdom of John Brown."
- 4 Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (A.L. Burt Company, 1947) 41.
- 5 Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 27.
- 6 Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986) 257.
- 7 Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 196) 449.
- 8 Ironically, the crab apple tree that Thoreau believed was wild had in fact been "transplanted and carefully preserved by the nurseryman Jonathan T. Grimes." Sayre 198.
- 9 Ronald Wesley Hoag, "Thoreau's Later Natural History Writings" in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199) 159.
- 10 Thoreau was indeed prescient. At the time of this writing, I have never tasted a huckleberry in its wild state. The closest I have come is purchasing huckleberry jam at the Shop at Walden Pond.
- 11 Some scholars believe Thoreau's fatal decline was begun when Bronson Alcott came calling with bronchitis, to discuss a one-year anniversary memorial for John Brown. If that's the case, one could say that Thoreau was another causality of Brown's raid, but since he and his family believe it was the chill that engendered the final illness, I will cast my vote with the Thoreaus' narrative.
- 12 Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006) 188-189.
- 13 *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, eds. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958) 618-619.
- 14 The Dispersion of Seeds was edited and published by Bradley P. Dean in 1993 as *Faith in a Seed*.
- 15 Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth Century Natural Science* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 200.

Chapter Four: *Artoosoqu'*: From Animate Matter to Mystical State

The white pine, freshly cut piled by the side of the Charles Mile Road—is agreeable to walk beside—I like the smell of it all ready for the borers—and the rich light yellow color of the freshly split wood and the purple sap at the ends of the quarters—from which distill perfectly clear & crystalline tears—colorless and brilliant as diamonds—tears shed for the loss of a forest—in which is a world of light & purity—its life oozing out.

Human beings with whom I have no sympathy are far stranger to me than inanimate matter rocks or earth—Looking on the last I feel as if were with my kindred.

-Henry David Thoreau

I

Thoreau's third approach to dying suggests the end of animate life and the mysticism both of dying and the "life" of inanimate matter, which I refer to as the physical/mystical. There are two elements in the physical/mystical, usually working in tandem. The first is one I've already discussed: transition states. This transition is the exact moment between life and death, the inexplicable transition from one state to another, which has such strong mystical connotations for Thoreau. The second approach involves inanimate matter. Thoreau frequently gives life to the inanimate parts of nature, as when he compares the weeping of John Brown and his wife to the rocks sweating. Thoreau uses the physical/mystical mode throughout the Journal, and it is a very decided part of *Walden*, as when he gives life to his fire or when he describes the thawing sand of the railroad cut. This chapter, however, focuses primarily on Thoreau's posthumously published *The Maine Woods*, where physical/mystical imagery is particularly concentrated. This book, which he was revising up until his death, was published in 1864, edited by his sister Sophia and his friend Ellery Channing. However, one cannot simply call this book a "late work," as Thoreau worked on it and published two sections of it in periodicals for over a decade. In fact, the first essay, "Ktaadn," drafted in the fall of 1846, during his second year at Walden has as fully

developed a sense of the physical/mystical as later parts of the book. Therefore, one cannot say *The Maine Woods* represented a late development in Thoreau's thinking about dying. Yet the predominance of the physical/mystical theme in this book about the experience of absolute wildness, which he anticipates in his closer-to-Concord nature writing, shows how for Thoreau the physical/mystical inheres in those parts of nature least hospitable to man.

In the *Walden* chapter "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," Thoreau notably writes, "If you stand right fronting and face to face with a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter [sic], and feel its sweet edge dividing you through heart and marrow, and so you will happily end your mortal career."¹ This enigmatic image is a pointed metaphor of dying, particularly dying well. But reality, which Thoreau believes few reach through "the mud and slush of opinion" to find, brings one to an irrefutable fact: the truth. He makes truth temporal by representing it as an exact present moment, sharp as a scimitar. This precise moment has a sweetness like a clean and perfect death, like the shedding of an eland's skin, and the scimitar of reality gleams on both sides with the light of truth and symmetry, beyond space. He puns on "happily," meaning both felicity and possibility, and suggesting that by concluding your "mortal career" there could be another career to come. This rich passage suggests both animate life and the mysticism of dying. It is a very physical image but has mystical connotations as well.

The first element of the physical/mystical, the transition state, is a physical reality in the first Journal entry which begins this chapter. In the quotation, Thoreau gives us another beautiful paradox. The freshly cut pine trees are sensually pleasing, both in look and scent. The passage seems to suggest that Thoreau goes out of his way to enjoy these cut-down trees. Yet the trees are "ready for the borers"—the second step in the transition of pine forest to lumber. The "rich

yellow” of the wood and “the purple color of the sap” are reminiscent of the flesh and blood of the freshly murdered. This image is reinforced when he talks about the clear liquid distilled from the quarters as being tears. By the end of the passage, what started out as a pleasantly sensual experience has become a mourning experience. In some ways—though certainly not all—the pines give great pleasure in their cut state because they are still recognizable as pine trees. But that state is the first step in their dying. Tears are symbolically shed by the lover of the pines as well as by the pines themselves. But at what point do the pines cease to be pines and become lumber? At first read it seems a gradual transition, but looking closely, the reader sees the transition occurs in the introduction of one word—“tears.” In all living beings, both plant and animal, the moment of transition between living and dying occurs instantaneously and can only be represented by the anticipation created by the turn of a phrase, in which living being becomes inanimate matter.

Thoreau contemplates a kind of “life” in inanimate matter in the second Journal quotation beginning this chapter, in which he turns his alienation from human companions and acquaintances into acceptance by the inanimate world. He draws kinship between himself and the rocks and the earth. Often, Thoreau sees in the inanimate that significant part of Emerson’s Not Me—his own body. In this way, he strengthens the kinship between himself and the rocks, earth, and water. For example, on December 15, 1850, Thoreau discusses the difference in the way he perceives his hands and his feet. “My feet are much nearer to foreign or inanimate matter or nature than my hands...they are more like the earth they tread on—they are more clod-like & lumpish &--I scarcely animate them” (PJ 3: 163). In reading this entry one thinks of Blake’s “The Clod & the Pebble.” In both instances, an inanimate lump of earth takes on a kind of inanimate life: in Blake it has a voice and in Thoreau it has kinship with a living man. Thoreau

sets up another paradox in that his hands, the more “human” part of his body, are animated by his living and thinking whereas his semi-inanimate feet achieve kinship with the earth he celebrates in the previous passage about the earth and rocks being his kindred.

Thoreau also wrote in his Journal, on May 12, 1851, about another mystical experience. A few days prior, he had had what was left of his teeth removed and been fitted for false teeth. Though he would refuse all opiates when he was dying a decade later, for the dental ordeal he tried an experiment—he had an ether-induced experience of altered consciousness. “By taking the ether the other day I was convinced how far asunder a man could be separated from his senses. You are told it will make you unconscious—but no one can imagine what it is to be unconscious...The value of the experiment is that it does give you experience of an interval *between* [emphasis added] one life and another—A greater space than you have ever travelled” (PJ 3: 218). Thoreau considered the ether experiment a success as it gave him insight into the liminality of consciousness. He never used ether again, but I would like to posit that he continued the experiment for the rest of the summer, the summer of 1851 being famous for his experience of another altered consciousness—the natural world by moonlight.²

On June 11, Thoreau writes, “[I]t was necessary to see objects by moonlight—as well as by sunlight—to get a complete notion of them” (PJ 3: 249). Like the mind itself, the physical world has two realities and exists somewhere between the two. All things, like all mental states, comprise an intermediary world suspended between two lives. In the same entry he writes, “I do not know but I feel less vigorous at night—my legs will not carry me so far—as if night were less favorable to muscular exertion—weakened us somewhat as plants grow pale” (252). Like the unconsciousness induced by ether, the nighttime world separates us from our physical reality and adumbrates the experience of dying. To be conscious of becoming unconscious is glimpsing

the space between the known world and something different. Dying is still on his mind when he writes, “Listen to music religiously as if were the last strain you might hear” (259). Ether and the experience of nighttime are preliminary to the experience of dying.

In Thoreau’s thinking there is an undercurrent of anxiety about the indefinable line that separates the life of day from the life of night. “Does perchance any of this pregnant air survive the dews of night—Can any of it be found remembering the sun of yesterday even in the morning hours? Does perchance some puff blast survive the night on elevated clearings surrounded by forest?” Does time encapsulate itself so that one morning is the same as the next morning separated by the night? And during the day is there some *elevated* [emphasis added] place where the night lives through the day? Such questions raise another one: how much consciousness must one have to apprehend unconsciousness? How much daylight must one know to experience the utter strangeness of the nighttime world? In the same night he hears a partridge drumming—a daytime sound—and writes, “What singularly space penetrating filling sound—why am I never nearer to its source?” (261). He cannot get closer to the source of sound, of night and time, or of consciousness. This in between of time and space is the location of dying. It is the ambiguity for which he takes the ether and goes into the moonlight to embrace.

II

The physical/mystical is the sinew that binds the many strains of *The Maine Woods*. Early in “Ktaadn,” as in the Journal entry that begins this chapter, we see a major theme of the book: the decimation of the white pine forests. Thoreau writes of the mills built over the rivers: “Here your inch, your two and three inch stuff begin to be, and Mr. Sawyer marks off those spaces which decide the fate of so many prostrate forests” (594). The sentence hinges on the word “begin,” because, though prostrate, the trees are still forests. The lumberers have only made a

first step in the carnage; the sawmill will convert the forest into something completely unrecognizable and different—rather than a mighty forest, one is left with puny one-, two-, and three-inch nameless “stuff.” South of Bangor Thoreau and his companions come across vast forests in which many trees stand, except for the white pine: of these nothing remains but stumps, the trees themselves having been sacrificed for fuel for Massachusetts and points south. What Thoreau gives us, rather than an intact forest, is one seemingly intact, but on closer inspection one transition from a living to a dead forest in which the heart and soul—the white pine—has been culled out. Thoreau comes back to this image of the white pine stumps numerous times in the book, even as far north as he travels in “The Allegash and the East Branch,” where he is appalled to hear loggers brag that they have cut down white pines so large that teams of oxen can stand on their stumps. “As if that were what the pine had grown for, to become the footstool of oxen” (796).

Another example of the transition state trees can occupy occurs in “Chesuncook.” Thoreau is able to admire trees that fall naturally rather than those murdered for greed. As Thoreau and his companions enter a northern forest they notice, “Sometimes an evergreen just fallen lay across the track with its rich burden of cones, looking, still, fuller of life than our trees in the most favorable positions” (663). Here Thoreau offers us a tree in a natural state of transition. He also offers a mystical conundrum. If the tree has fallen, is it a dead tree? It has so many cones it appears more “alive” than trees still standing in Concord. What then makes a tree alive? Left to fall naturally, the tree, which moves in slow time compared to humans and other animals, is alive, and as Thoreau puns, “*spruce*,” yet at the same time, in falling it has died. With its myriad cones it is in a long-lasting instant of transition, a dying tree that is neither dead nor alive. He explores this further in an image that is both comical and mystical. In the woods on a

still night with their Penobscot guide, Joe Aitteon, they hear “from the moss-clad aisles, a dull dry rushing sound, with a solid core to it...like the shutting of a door in some distant entry of the damp and shaggy wilderness” (671). Awed, they whisper to Aitteon to tell them what it was, and the Indian replies, “Tree fall.” Thoreau plays with the old adage: if no one were there to hear it, would a tree falling in a forest make a noise? But this is also a physical/mystical experience for Thoreau. A tree falling is a physical dying, but the uncanny comes in when no particular reason that the auditors can know causes the mysterious sound of dying in nature. This falling, however, is further proof that, left to her own devices, nature has no deaths as humans understand them, but instead follows an ongoing cycle of living and dying.

One of the most beautiful passages about the transition between living and dying is the famous trout fishing scene in “Ktaadn.” As some of the party set up camp for the night, Thoreau and a few others find left-behind birch poles and go out in the boat to fish a fast-moving stream flowing in from Ktaadn. “Speckled trout and silvery roach” quickly fall upon the bait, and the men toss them on the bank where they slither right back into the water. Finally, Thoreau loses his hook and stands on the shore as the fish are thrown to him. Speaking of himself in the third person to give primacy to the fish rather than the fisherman, Thoreau has a very physical experience of the dying fish. “[T]hey fell in a perfect shower around him—sometimes, wet and slippery, full in his face and bosom, as his arms were outstretched to receive them.” This would be merely a comic set-piece if it weren’t for the dazzling beauty of the sundown scene: The fish, *while yet alive* [emphasis added]...glistened like the fairest flowers, the product of primitive rivers, and he could hardly trust his senses...that these jewels should have swam away in that Aboljacknagesic water for so long, so many dark ages...made beautiful the Lord only knows why to swim there!” (632). This description is of one of Thoreau’s ecstatic nature experiences,

and it is about dying. Like the beautiful clam shell left “tenantless,” discussed in Chapter Two, the eland skin of Chapter Three, and the pines on the Charles Mill Road at the beginning of this chapter, an extraordinary sensual beauty clings to the dying of natural objects. The fishes’ beauty is unknown as they swim alive in a wilderness stream, and they can only die for their beauty to be known by human eyes. This beauty is transient—once the fish are out of the water they are only “bright fluviatile flowers” in the moments in which they are dying and it is only during this moment of transition that human eyes can behold the glory nature has made for no reason mankind can understand.

That night Thoreau awoke to wonder if he hadn’t dreamed the entire experience and fell to fishing again. “There stood Ktaadn with distinct and cloudless outline in the moonlight...The speckled trout and the silvery roach...sped swiftly through the moonlight air, describing bright arcs on the dark side of Ktaadn” (633-634). Besides its beauty, this passage invokes the uncanny in the question of what is animate and what is inanimate. The inanimate mountain, both previously and later partially obscured by cloud cover, stands out distinctly by moonlight. Thoreau again uses no first person to describe his fishing—the fish appear to fly across the outline of the mountain of their own volition. Are these “silvery arcs” alive? Technically, while the fish are still on the line, we know they are—but this is not a technical passage. Thoreau, the nameless speaker, we know, is animate; the great rock of the mountain is inanimate, but passing between the two are silver arcs that are more than fish, that are timelessness itself, silver instantaneous transitions between animate and inanimate.

The moose-killing scene in “Chesuncook” is as shocking as the “Ktaadn” fishing scenes are magical, yet both invoke the same sense of transition. Thoreau prepares us for that fact that, though he is interested in botanizing, seeing the wild country, and learning what he can about the

Indians, his companions are there to hunt moose. Aitteon shoots at a cow moose and her calf while Thoreau is “plucking the seeds of the great round-leaved orchis,” a sylvan and innocent occupation juxtaposed with the killing. “Joe exclaimed from the stream that he had found the cow moose lying dead, but quite warm, in the middle of the stream.”³ With difficulty, Thoreau and Aitteon drag the dead moose by her ears, for her “long nose [was] frequently sticking to the bottom,” (678) a horrifying scene reminiscent of the fishing out of the river of Zenobia’s body in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*.⁴ The dead moose, as alive, is a warm-blooded creature who finds a measure of refuge in the water. Is the corpse they are dragging still a moose? In the moments after becoming inanimate matter, the moose is still creaturely. Thoreau emphasizes the female in the moose to heighten the sense of continued life-like attributes, even as she is butchered. The Indian begins to skin the animal while Thoreau watches: “a tragical business it was,--to see that still warm and palpitating body pierced with a knife, to see the warm milk stream from the rent udder, and the ghastly naked red carcass appearing from within its seemly robe, which was meant to hide it” (680). Of course, he is punning on the word “hide,” but that does not lessen the hideousness of what he sees. Utilizing both the heroic narrative in evoking terror and pity and the sentimental narrative in his pointed reference to the moose’s motherhood, he modifies the adjective “naked” with the adverb “ghastly.” The reader must not underestimate Thoreau’s nineteenth-century sensibilities—nudity, particularly female nudity—is a horrifying concept. Warm blood mixed with warm milk is something no man should see, and in witnessing the baring of the naked red female, Thoreau is participating in a kind of rape. He emphasizes his own guilt in this act by measuring the carcass—erroneously as it turns out—and in enjoying her flesh, which he says “tasted like tender beef...sometimes like veal” (681), suggesting both

femininity and innocence; but he also says of moose in general that shooting them is like shooting your neighbor's horses, that they are "God's own horses, poor timid creatures" (683).

After the death of the moose, the excursion is partially ruined for Thoreau. "I...felt myself the coarser for this part of my woodland experience, and was reminded that life should be lived as daintily and tenderly as one would pluck a flower" (684), his occupation before the moose was slain. The moose's murder informs the rest of the chapter, particularly in relation to the despoliation of the white pine. He writes, "Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it" (685). By referring to the pine tree as a "creature," Thoreau is giving it agency—a remarkable way to look at a tree. This agency, however, is what makes the pines' destruction so vile, because their death is on the same level as that of an animal, or even a man. After writing "Nature looked sternly upon me" in the death of the moose, he moves immediately to the pines: "Strange that so few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light" (684). He castigates himself here, for earlier in the chapter he had spoken admiringly of the skills and livelihoods of the lumbermen. He further anthropomorphizes the trees by calling their branches arms. When he asks rhetorically if the lumberman is the true friend of the pine, he answers definitively, "No! no! it is the poet; it is he who makes the truest use of the pine," reminding himself of his own higher calling.

Just as Thoreau makes the death of the moose more graphic and horrible by emphasizing the animal's femaleness, Thoreau also feminizes the pine tree. The poet, unlike the lumberman, "does not fondle [the pine] with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane—who knows whether its heart is false without cutting into it." This is nineteenth-century language for a man with a prostitute, more shocking because after the lumberman has been intimate with the

tree, he cuts her open to inspect her heart.⁵ As the hunter rapes the moose, so the lumberman prostitutes the white pine—the very femaleness of the animal and tree emphasize their helplessness. When speaking of the man “who has bought the stumpage of the township” he writes, “All the pines shudder and heave a sigh when *that* man steps on the forest floor” (685). This passage gives the sense of a whole congregation of powerless women about to fall prey to a lustful, avaricious man. It is also another example of anthropomorphism, the pine trees of course heaving and shuddering from the wind rather than the land speculator. He is making the pines human but is hinting at their inanimacy as well. Around the time Thoreau drafted “Chesuncook” he wrote in his Journal “I mistook the creaking of a tree in the woods the other day for the scream of a hawk. How numerous the resemblances of the animate to the inanimate!” (PJ 7: 235). If Thoreau can conceive of the trees as both human and inanimate, then he is giving life, agency, and voice to the inanimate. The pine trees shudder, as the rocks sweat, and Captain and Mrs. Brown weep.

III

In “Ktaadn,” shortly after Thoreau and his companions have their trout fishing experience, Thoreau makes a preliminary late-afternoon climb up one side of Ktaadn. A major theme in “Ktaadn” is the life of rocks and in that first climb Thoreau tries to pastoralize the rocks, though as he climbs higher, they become stranger. As Thoreau comes up the side of the mountain, “[G]ray, silent rocks were the flocks and herds that pastured, chewing a rocky cud at sunset” (638). Just prior to this he had called the stunted trees he climbed over a “garden,” so that he attempts to turn this daunting landscape into a Concord meadow. Yet this domesticating serves to increase rather than decrease the alien nature of the landscape he is venturing into. A stunted forest and bare rock outlined against the sunset are emphatically not a welcoming scene, but a

prelude to the disconnect and ultimate connection he will experience with inanimate matter as he climbs higher.⁶

In the night which separates Thoreau's two climbs up Ktaadn, one of his companions has a nightmare. The man awakens Thoreau and the others at midnight with a cry, springing from their bed of twigs "thinking the world on fire" (639). This sense of alienation from the known world anticipates what Thoreau will experience on the mountain his second day.

In the morning, all the men begin to climb Ktaadn, but Thoreau soon far outpaces the others, moving beyond the stunted trees and into a world of rocks, "as if sometime it had rained rocks and they lay as they fell...leaning on each other." Just as he had tried to pastoralize the rocks the previous afternoon, he now attempts to anthropomorphize them, describing them as leaning into one another like people caught in a rainstorm. However, Thoreau immediately drops this simile to get at the true life of rocks: "They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry" (639). In "Spring," nature is "sportive" and creative, spewing life forms in the shape of the thawing clay of the railroad cut; here nature is rougher and more primeval, preparing the inanimate bedrock of the earth. Once again he is high in the clouds as he was in "Tuesday," but this time the clouds don't create a sense of heightened wonder, the awakening into a new world: instead, he is "deep within the hostile ranks of clouds, and all objects were obscured by them." Just sentences before, he had invested the rocks with human qualities—now they begin to rob him of his humanity. "It was vast, Titanic, such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs... and [Nature] pilfers him of some of his divine faculties" (640). The rocks not only begin to leech away at his human heart, but also to rob him of all pretense of theomorphism; the idea that he is made in the image of God becomes meaningless in an inanimate world. Notably, in this inimical

and inanimate world, he gives nature a voice. She asks, ““Why came ye here before your time?”” (640). Because nature personifies the natural world, Thoreau, in giving her a voice, is giving this inanimate place a voice. The rocks seem to speak for nature, admonishing the climber for venturing into a world not yet prepared for human habitation. Thoreau notes that the Indians, whom he believes have an especially close bond to nature, never climb steep, rocky places: “their tops are sacred and mysterious tracts” (641) to the Indians, who revere them from a distance. Yet Thoreau has come where nature doesn’t want the presence of man prying into her work: “Why seek me when I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother?”(641). This question emphasizes the solitary state of the climber, cut off from his companions by distance and from nature as he knows her—benign, loving, and indulgent. Finally, the growing cloud cover emphasizes his dangerous solitude, and he climbs back down to his companions to puzzle out what he has experienced. On his way down he encounters, here and there, a stray sparrow, “unable to command its course like a fragment of gray rock blown off by the wind” (641-642); here he likens the small birds to inanimate rock and, by inference, compares himself to a piece of rock falling down Ktaadn, so altered is he by his experience.

On the way back from the mountain the men cross a burnt-over forest, with blueberry bushes and young poplars coming up amid the fallen timber, and the scene feels familiar to him, like a burnt-woods-going-to-meadow back in Concord, but he realizes no man is the proprietor of this kind of country. In acclimating himself to the lack of ties this place has to man, he writes one of his most difficult paradoxes: “And yet we have not seen pure Nature unless we see her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities” (645). The first part of the sentence is in keeping with what comes before—he feels he has gotten the primeval experience of pre-human, even pre-animal and plant nature in his ascent of Ktaadn. But how can one

experience this kind of nature in a city crowded with people? Because the masses of people are just the point. The nature he refers to is the unanimated part of the globe and that includes the human body minus the “vital” or “divine” part, that leaves just this human body matter merely, one that, like his feet in the Journal entry, sympathize more with the dirt than his mind-centered hands. A city is a vast aggregate of bodies, each as strange to him as his own. He writes, “I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one...but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them” (646). Each human body represents this same bond with the inanimate world, and to meet other bodies would be to bump up against the inanimacy of his own flesh and bones, more terrifying in a city because of the number of bodies, each one composed of matter which is inexplicable.⁷

Matter, however, is the whole point. Thoreau makes matter godlike by capitalizing it and in this way makes it nature’s principal avatar in the forbidding world of Ktaadn. Once again he puts himself in third person, this time to give primacy to pure, unanimated matter: “It was Matter, vast terrific,--not his Mother Earth...not for him to tread on or be buried in,--no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there” (645). In the pages leading up to this revelation, he keeps trying to understand the “Titan” possessing him, the “Titanic” in nature and now he sees that this titanic entity is matter itself and he must integrate his new knowledge of matter into human living and dying. A man cannot be too familiar with matter, even the matter that comprises his own body, because of its power. Yet he must seek to come to terms with it, and consequently his demand for contact: “Think of our life in nature,--daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,--rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks!” (646). Not just clouds and rocks, but wind and trees are all matter Thoreau must learn to accept as completely alien to him, but also of the same stuff as his own “titanic” body.

In a shorter but equally significant passage in “The Allegash,” Thoreau once again gives life to inanimate matter. He, his companion, and their guide Joe Polis sleep in “a dense and damp spruce and fir wood,” (730) absolutely dark except for their fire. Thoreau awakens after midnight and discovers phosphorescent wood in their fire, the first he has ever seen. He finds “a perfectly regular elliptical ring of light... fully as bright as the fire, but a white and slumbering light” (730). The wood he finds it in is dead, he emphasizes, and the white light is ghost-like. Thoreau cuts some pieces to show his companion, and “[t]hey lit up the inside of my hand, revealing the lines and wrinkles” (730-731). Thoreau goes on to say, “It could hardly have thrilled me more if it had taken the form of letters, or the human face” (731), and is glad he sees this phenomenon for the first time in such a wild place. The next morning Polis tells them the Penobscot word for this other-worldly light is “*Artoosoqu*.” Thoreau doesn’t care to know the scientific explanation for the phenomenon and “rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow-creature” (731). He goes on to say that *Artoosoqu*’ made him further believe that “the woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day” (732).

This seems a different approach to the life of inanimate matter than that Thoreau expressed in “Ktaadn.” There is no painful, drawn-out process of the recognition of kinship to the utterly alien. However, just the process is different—the recognition is the same. The cold coals light up his hand, drawing all its particulars into relief, as though the dead pieces of wood are what give life to Thoreau’s living hand. He recognizes this strange light as a fellow being because it glows as mysteriously as a man lives, and as briefly, since he cannot get any light out of the pieces the next night. In “Ktaadn” he has established his kinship with earth, rocks, trees, and wind. In *Walden* he personifies fire. But the *Artoosoqu*’ is a symbol for the life in all inanimate matter. Beyond science, beyond the ontological puzzle he struggled with on Ktaadn,

this light glows not only into his hand but into his imagination. Once again, Thoreau has made contact. The cold light of the phosphorescent wood is the moon to the fire's sun. Leading its brief life, like its fellow being Thoreau, it animates the strangeness of the nighttime wilderness and its own existence.

1 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: The Library of America, 1985) 400.

2 Robert Milder has also connected the ether experiment and the moonlight walks with dying. “Thoreau projects a development beyond as the soul deprived of sensible feelers, begins to put forth spiritual ones. A rehearsal for death, the unconsciousness wrought by the anesthesia seems to prefigure a passage between ontological states, the future one unimaginable in substance but infinitely alluring. Initiated four days after taking the ether, Thoreau’s moonlight walks of May through September seem efforts to re-enter this transition world suggestive of pre- and post-existence.” I would add to this, however, that the transition state is the main objective of both the ether and moonlight experiences, rather than an ontological quest for what lies beyond the transition state. See: Robert Milder, *Reimagining Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 110.

3 This description seems to anticipate Thoreau’s experience of his own father’s death. On February 3, 1859, he writes in his Journal, “I have touched a body that was flexible and warm, yet tenantless,—warmed by what fire? When the spirit that animated some matter has left it, who else, what else, can animate it?” (J VIII: 435).

4 Martha Hunt, a young woman in straitened circumstances, drowned herself in the Concord River in July 1845. Hawthorne was one of the men in the boat who retrieved her body and this became part of his inspiration for the search for Zenobia’s body. See: Leslie Perrin Wilson, *In History’s Embrace: Past and Present in Concord, Massachusetts* (Concord: Concord Free Public Library Corporation, 2007) 71. I believe Thoreau, who was in the same boat that night, was also impressed enough by the night’s events to have them inform his description of the dragging of the female moose from the stream.

5 This description of the murder of a pine tree brings to mind something Thoreau would have been familiar with from the reprint of the trial transcripts from the *New York Transcript*, reprinted as a full front page article in the *Concord Freeman* on June 18 of that year: the lurid details of the 1836 murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett by her lover/customer Richard P. Robinson. My thanks again to Robert Gross for the historical background.

6 David M. Robinson draws a very interesting parallel between the Ktaadn experience and the experience of the moonlight walks I discussed earlier in this chapter. “As different as these two forms of natural experience were, they had an important quality in common: they showed Thoreau the natural world from a new prospect, making the familiar seem strange...In both experiences, Thoreau glimpsed a natural world that was uninhabited, undomesticated, and wild.” See David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 129-130.

7 Robinson notes, “This clear repudiation of his earlier anthropomorphic representations of nature is emphasized by the concentration of earth as ‘matter,’ and the implication that this matter is beyond the power of mind to project or control it.” 137.

Chapter Five: “As Long As She Cracks She Holds”: Thoreau’s Dying as His Final Text

It is work to die, to know how to approach and endure life’s last moments. Of all living things, only humans consciously anticipate death; the consequent need to choose how to behave in its face—to worry about how to die—distinguishes us from other animals. The need to manage death is the particular lot of humanity.

-Drew Gilpin Faust

I

The previous chapters have outlined three narratives Thoreau relied on in his wrestling with the fact of dying: the sentimental, the heroic, and the physical/mystical. This final chapter shows Thoreau integrating all three into the process of his own dying, creating from this process an actual, legible text on meaningful dying. Unlike his earlier episodes of near-fatal illness in which he was afflicted with lethargy and despair, Thoreau’s final illness was marked by industry, cheerfulness, and a warmth surprising to those outside his immediate family who had always seen him as the village n’er do well and misanthrope. However, his lifelong studies of village society in relation to nature, particularly in the last decade of his life, gave him an epistemological model of the proper way one should go about dying.

As Thoreau came to realize that his 1860 illness would be his last, he constructed from his studies of dying a text that could easily be read by his survivors. As I have shown in relation to his writing, dying as sentimental, heroic, and physical/mystical grew primarily out of his nature studies. When it came time for his own dying, he incorporated the sentimental he had found in the woods and swamps by accelerating his gradual re-introduction of himself into his family and community that had begun with the Thoreaus moving into the Yellow House in 1850. This sentimental text of his dying was particularly legible to his relatives, especially his last remaining sibling, his sister Sophia, who spent the fourteen years between her brother’s death

and her own re-reading and disseminating this text as a significant Henry Thoreau legacy that was picked up by many of her contemporaries.

Dying as a heroic act was a well-known trope in 1862, a particularly difficult year for the Union. As I have shown, Thoreau replaced his horror at physical death with his growing understanding of the heroism that inheres in the ongoing process of generation in nature. There is no true death in nature; rather an ongoing process of ripening rides the planet through its eternal present of cycle. Whether this means the autumnal falling of leaves and apples, the spring devouring of frog spawn by hungry birds, or the annihilation of an entire stand of pine woods to make way for a stand of oak, heroic dying always means willingly planting oneself for a new generation.

Thoreau could have very well modeled much of his own dying on John Brown's behavior after his capture at Harpers Ferry. Brown, realizing he could do more for the cause of abolition by dying, refused last minute attempts for his rescue or the commuting of his sentence to life imprisonment.¹ Thoreau, also feeling he had reached his own ripeness, his own "peculiar autumnal tint," refused any medical treatment which may have prolonged his life. Just as Brown refused the comfort of what he perceived as a corrupt southern clergy, Thoreau refused all opiates which would have eased his pain but clouded his mind. Most importantly, both Brown and Thoreau, up until their final moments, wrote copious, eloquent prose which they knew would have great impact due to the circumstances in which it was written. I am not saying that Thoreau exactly modeled his dying on Brown's—rather, he saw Brown's dying as the rare human model of how to die as nature teaches: with that example, Thoreau embraced the heroism of dying in nature.

The stoicism of Thoreau's dying was read most clearly and disseminated most widely in Emerson's funeral eulogy, later expanded to a lengthy obituary in *The Atlantic*. Emerson of course had far greater influence than Thoreau's sister and his mythically stoic Thoreau took precedence, especially in the decades after the Civil War when the sentimental reading of a man's life fell out of favor.² Though Thoreau himself left no record of sympathy with the Union dead, those reading his dying as a heroic text easily made that connection. As well known for his intermittent though passionate denunciations of slavery and the wishy-washiness of northern abolitionists as he was as a philosopher and naturalist, the heroic reading of Thoreau's dying easily put him in the company of all those dying for the cause of freedom.

Though Thoreau emphatically created a physical/mystical element to the text of his dying, this version has had the fewest readers. Perhaps this is because by the beginning of the Civil War, transcendentalism, though it continues to have adherents to this day (this writer included), was no longer a significant literary and cultural movement and in fact was already being seen as quaint, naïve, and out of step with the times. But until the end of his life, Thoreau continued to call himself a transcendentalist, perhaps with more relish as fewer and fewer writers, poets, and intellectuals were willing to continue to own the name.

In a time of war, the vision of time as ungraspable, something not bounded by clocks and railroad schedules, but as an ontological puzzle, had no valance to most people. Even Emerson had put aside most explication of the indefinable present moment in being caught up in the war—not to mention that Emerson was not yet preparing to leave the world. But on his dying bed Thoreau continued his study of the present moment, that “meeting of two eternities.”

Present time is a transitional moment that cannot be identified or experienced until it has passed and in that sense has no existence except as a mystical state. Transition, or liminal, states

represent one basis of transcendental thought. No other transcendentalist devoted as much thought or as many pages to these transition states as Thoreau. No season could ever be pinpointed: autumn contained the summer just passing, the winter coming, and the eventual returning of spring. In narrowing his seasonal observations to months, weeks, and even days, Thoreau still knew he could never capture that exact transition from one state to another except through representations in his Journal after the moment had passed. As I have said in my previous chapter, the most compelling transition state for him was dying: at what point did a white pine or a moose cease to be pine and moose and become lumber and meat? The leaves of the scarlet oak, the last leaves of autumn, “[l]ifted higher and higher, and sublimating more and more, putting off some earthiness and cultivating more intimacy with the light...have at length the least possible amount of earthly matter and...dance arm and arm with the light.”³

These dying leaves fluttering in the late afternoon sun are in a transition state both instantaneous and perpetual through words. Like the leaves, Thoreau has put off most of his earthiness and is very close to death, but in spirit he is still alive, having his last dance with the light, even if he is dancing by dictating from his pillow-propped chair and his light is his mother’s parlor hearth. Thin and wasted as the leaves, in the midst of dying he is still living, the inverse of traditional Christian mysticism, that in the midst of life one must always remember death. Thoreau utilized this liminal state when he wrote about John Brown in the past tense even before Brown had actually been hanged, and Bronson Alcott, that famously Platonic old mystic, picked up on that when he published his Thoreau eulogy, “The Forester” in *The Atlantic* just before Thoreau had actually died.

II

From his last months Thoreau's dying spoke to the "readers" of that text. Two of Louisa May Alcott's adult novels, *Moods* and *Work*, featured characters based on Thoreau. These men raised gardens, played the flute, fed birds from their hands, wove superior birch bark baskets to hold berries, and, most importantly, died young, cheerfully and courageously, sacrificing themselves that others might live. When Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne returned to Concord from Europe in the early 1860s, their daughter Rose was terrified by the staring gray eyes and enormous nose of her father's friend Mr. Thoreau, until he redeemed himself for her by "fall[ing] desperately ill." Once dead, he ever after became her companion when she "gathered a cardinal flower or any rare bloom."⁴ Even today, the most glancing reader of Thoreau knows that on his death bed, when asked if he could see the other side of the "dark river" he was approaching, replied "one world at a time." To whom he said this, and in what context, is trumped by the fact of his saying it, and it has become a touchstone phrase for any number of not even marginally Thoreauvian contexts. Why this response along with Thoreau's exemplary death continues to be so widely embraced by Thoreau enthusiasts can be explained by the significance the character of Thoreau, as much as the works of Thoreau, has taken on. This chapter illustrates how Thoreau's early and lingering dying was a continuation of the theme of dying he played and battled with in all his writing, and as such can be read as a creative text "written" by Thoreau, and interpreted and continued by his family, friends, associates, and subsequent generations of readers and admirers.

In the chapter "Text as Testament: Reading *Walden* for the Author" in his *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell says that unlike Emerson, Thoreau "has been seen much more as a great American *character*, on similar legendary and historical footing as Daniel

Boone, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln.”⁵ This creation of the Thoreauvian “character” is a creation fully aided by Thoreau himself. In these passages Buell is talking about the perception of Thoreau as a moral exemplar of environmentalism even if much of his writing can be read as more transcendental than environmentalist. But this idea of Thoreau’s life as well as his work being seen as a process of artistic and moral self-definition I will also apply to his experience of his own end-of-life experience and is why I choose to read not Thoreau’s “death,” but his “dying,” a dynamic and on-going process that began with his earliest experiences of fatal illness and continues through our current reading of those experiences.

Philippe Aries in his vast and brilliant *The Hour of Our Death* posits that in the nineteenth-century, with the fading of interest in the traditional afterlife, emphasis was placed on the actual moment of death—the separation of the dying man from his loved ones at the instant his soul separates from his body. Aries names this “the beautiful death,” in which the character of the dying man, the holiness of his living, is reflected in the holiness of his dying.⁶ Gary Laderman, in his *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death 1799-1883*, elaborates further: “A strong sense of spiritual and moral certitude permeated the beautiful death, and the deathbed ... was the sacrosanct place where religious edification could be bestowed on those who entered the death chamber.”⁷

Though more than thirty years old, Lewis O. Saum’s essay “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America” is still a key text in understanding dying in antebellum culture. Saum writes, “The acme of privilege came in witnessing a ‘triumphant’ death. In the abstract one encounters the contention that ‘holy dying’ represented the logical finality of ‘holy living.’”⁸ The bulk of this fascinating essay is comprised of letters written to and from Americans who had moved west, describing the deathbed scenes of loved ones and the earnest answering of

questions by absent relatives about the quality of those scenes. The mistake Saum, and to a certain extent Laderman and Aries, makes, is the assumption that the importance of the deathbed scene and the poignancy of the letters describing those scenes to absent friends, were limited to those whom Saum referred to as “the unlettered.” Much of what we know about Thoreau’s dying was recorded by his fellow transcendentalists, and most especially, by his well-educated and well-read sister Sophia in the letters she wrote to her brother’s friend, Daniel Ricketson, who asked her for a detailed description of what he had missed by being too squeamish to attend the deathbed ritual of his dearest friend.

On May 20, 1862, she wrote him: “Profound joy mingles with my grief. I feel as if something very beautiful had happened, not death; although Henry is no longer with us... You ask for some particulars relating to Henry’s illness. I feel like saying Henry was never affected, never reached by it. I never saw before saw such a manifestation of the power of spirit over matter. Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as much as ever. He remarked to me that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body.”⁹ Thoreau himself also participated in this recounting of the deathbed by letter, also to Ricketson, describing the deathbed of his father in February 1859, including the sense of humor he and his father shared: “Till within a week or ten days before he died he was hoping to see another spring, but he then discovered that this was a vain expectation, and, thinking he was dying, he took leave of us several times within a week before his departure. Once or twice he expressed slight impatience at the delay. He was quite conscious to the last, and his death was so easy that, though we had all been sitting around the bed for an hour or more expecting that event (as we had sat before), he was gone at last almost before we were aware of it” (Ricketson 92).

If anyone can be said to have experienced the nineteenth-century beautiful death that person would have to be Henry Thoreau, though his earlier experiences of serious illness were not the triumph his final illness turned out to be. In fact, earlier bouts felled him emotionally and creatively as well as physically. After his beloved brother's John's horrifying death from lockjaw in 1842, Thoreau, who was living with the Emersons at the time, moved back home for a few months. Initially, he was lethargic and unemotional. After the funeral, however, he suffered from strange, sympathetic lockjaw symptoms of great severity. His distressed family believed they were about to lose their younger son as well, until he began to rally a few days later. However, he was many months recovering. He was listless, uninterested in his nature studies, frail, and unable to write.

Thoreau was also stricken in the months following the publication of *Walden* in August 1854. No doubt related to the incipient consumption that probably also influenced his illness in 1842, this bout also had strange and uncharacteristic symptoms. In addition to the lethargy and inability to write, the great walker's famously sturdy and long-ranging legs failed him. This bizarre ailment lingered, with occasional abatements, for nearly two years. Richardson writes, "Emerson noted with alarm in June [1855] that Thoreau was feeble and languishing. Alcott thought he seemed shiftless for the first time. Channing noted that his cough was particularly bad that summer...In early October he visited Ricketson for a few days, compelled by his continued weakness to travel about the countryside by wagon."¹⁰

Thoreau wrote about this illness and depression sporadically in his Journal but discussed it with more depth in his letters to longtime Worcester correspondent Harrison G.O. Blake. On June 27, 1855 he wrote to him: "I have been sick and good for nothing but to lie on my back and wait for something to turn up, for two or three months. This has *compelled* me to postpone

several things, among them writing to you...not having brains adequate to such exertion. I should feel a little less ashamed if I could give any name to my disorder but I cannot...and I will not take the name of any disease in vain.”¹¹ This connection between his ability to write and his ability to walk is one that Thoreau and all his intimates knew well. By 1850 he had set the pattern for the rest of his life: most afternoons, in all weather, he would walk outdoors for several hours, taking brief field notes, which he would later expand into Journal entries, sometimes several days’ worth in one sitting.¹² In his funeral address, Emerson would say of his peripatetic friend, “He said he wanted every stride his legs made. The length of his stride uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house he did not write at all.”¹³ Thoreau continues his June 27 letter to Blake “I expected in the winter to be deep in the woods of Maine in my canoe [a bit of epistolary license: Thoreau built his own boats but longed for a Maine Indian to teach him how to build his own canoe] long before this, but I am so far from this I can only take a languid walk in Concord streets.” He finishes the letter playfully yet ominously “I thank you again and again for the encouragement your letters are to me. But I must stop this writing, or I shall have to pay for it,” (*Correspondence* 119-120) as if the very act of writing put his life in danger.¹⁴

He continued to write Blake of his weak legs until the end of September of 1855. However, on September 26 he is anticipating a hopeful outcome, one in which he will again be able to align his creativity with nature and in which his long fallow period will enrich a coming seedtime: “But I do not see how strength is to be got into my legs again. These months of feebleness have yielded few, if any, thoughts, though they may not have passed without serenity, such as our sluggish Musketaquid suggests. I hope that the harvest is to come.” A few paragraphs later he recounts a dream of his that seems to bear out his anticipation: “I dreamed, last night,

that I could vault over any height that pleased me. That was *something*; and I contemplated myself with a slight satisfaction in the morning for it” (*Correspondence* 125-126).

On a warm April 10 in 1856, as his long, post-*Walden* illness was winding down, Thoreau wrote in his Journal of the last of the snow: “In the shade of walls and north hillsides and cool hollows in the woods, it is panting its life away...It is now advancing toward summer apace, and we seem to be reserved to taste its sweetness, but to perform what great deeds? Do we detect the reason why we also did not die on the approach of spring?” (J VIII: 272). The implication is that he has not completed his apprenticeship in Nature: one cannot die, as he says in “A Plea for Captain John Brown” until he has learned to live.

The last eighteen months of Thoreau’s life are familiar to many readers, so I will review them briefly.¹⁵ All his life Thoreau—who, came, like so many New Englanders of his day from a consumptive family—had been in indifferent health. This, with a few well-known exceptions, had rarely prevented him from being out of doors in all kinds of weather. The most popular version of his dying is that he caught cold counting tree rings on a wet, blustery December 3 in 1860. Despite the severity of his cold, he refused to cancel his “Autumnal Tints” lecture in New Bedford later that week.

The lecture and the traveling made him much worse, and he soon developed severe bronchitis,¹⁶ which kept him housebound the rest of the winter. He did not improve much in the spring, but was able to resume some of his outdoor activities. Probably sensing that this could well be his final illness, he began trying to organize his vast notebooks into the books he had hoped to create from them: *The Succession of Trees*, *Notes on Wild Fruits*, *Night and Moonlight*. He may also have hoped to turn his massive notes on American Indians into a book as well.

As his strength rapidly declined, family, friends, and doctors urged him to travel to a different climate. He rejected the time and expense of Europe and the humidity of the West Indies, and opted instead for Minnesota. Since none of his usual companions would accompany him, he chose as a traveling companion Horace Mann Jr. Only seventeen, young Mann had already proven himself a talented and mature botanist. Many of the details of the Minnesota trip are known to us primarily through the letters Mann wrote his mother.¹⁷

Though Thoreau was able to do a significant amount of botanizing for one so frail, see the American west for the first and only time, and even witness some Plains Indians, he did not get any better and he and Mann returned to Concord early, after being gone only six weeks. Once home, he seemed to rally again. He made a final visit to Daniel Ricketson in New Bedford in August, where his friend convinced him to sit for the Dunnshee ambrotype, the one in which he has a full beard and somewhat gaunt face. Back in Concord, walking was difficult for him, so Judge Hoar lent him a horse and buggy, and he and his sister Sophia took nearly daily drives. Sophia was with him the last time he visited Walden, in September 1861. While his sister sketched, Thoreau gathered wild grapes, which he dropped into the water one by one.

As autumn 1861 progressed, in addition to the tuberculosis he was still calling bronchitis, he developed pleurisy. No one except the ever-unrealistic Ricketson expected him to survive. He made his last journal entry on November 3. Knowing his time was short, he set aside his large projects and concentrated on what he could accomplish in a few months. He did in those months what would be a vast amount of work for anyone, but for a weak, dying man, it was an astonishing output. He revised his three Maine essays and his Cape Cod excursions to be published as posthumous books. He prepared four essays for *The Atlantic*, and negotiated second editions of both *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and corrected the

many printing errors from the first edition of the *Week*. When he was too weak to hold a pencil he dictated to Sophia.

In addition to his astonishing industry, friends and neighbors were struck by his cheerfulness, tenderness, and humor. When he could no longer manage the stairs, even with assistance, his small cane bed, which he had put together for his Walden house, was brought into the parlor. Mrs. Thoreau noted that her parlor in no way resembled a sickroom, as her son desired it to be filled books and flowers. When he heard children playing outside he asked that they be brought in to visit him. An organ grinder playing an old song on the street brought him to tears and made him bid his mother, “Give him some money!”

Friends and townspeople visited often, bringing fruit, invalid food, and news of the spring. The bluebird had always been Thoreau’s harbinger of spring and Emerson reported its arrival to him, along with regular bulletins on the state of the ice on the ponds. One day, as Emerson was arriving, Sam Staples, Thoreau’s old jailer, was just leaving and said, he had ““never spent an hour with more satisfaction. Never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace.””¹⁸ While the ice remained, Harrison Blake and Theo Brown skated to Concord from Worcester for warm and spirited conversation, though by this time Thoreau could only speak in a whisper. Brown later wrote to Ricketson of one of those visits. “We found him pretty low, but well enough to be up in his chair. He seemed glad to see us; said we had not come much too soon...[H]is talk was up to the best I ever heard from him—the same depth of earnestness and the same infinite depth of fun going on at the same time.”¹⁹

Just weeks before Thoreau’s death, the Unitarian minister, Grindell Reynolds, who had performed Thoreau’s father’s funeral and would preside over Thoreau’s, found him at work on his papers. When his Aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God he said, “I was

never aware we had ever quarreled, Aunt.” Though he continually said he had no regrets, he did have one concern: his “Allegash and East Branch” chapter of *The Maine Woods*, he told his old walking companion, Ellery Channing, was still in a snarl.²⁰

On Monday, May 5, 1862, Channing and Alcott called for the last time. Before they left, Alcott leaned over and kissed Thoreau’s forehead, “with the damps of death upon it.”²¹ That night Thoreau asked Sophia to fetch his old friend, the farmer Edmund Hosmer, to sit up with him. When Hosmer was leaving in the morning, Thoreau whispered to Sophia to give him his own copy of *A Week*, the one containing a lock of his brother John’s hair.²² Still revising on the last morning of his life, Thoreau and Sophia picked up where they had left off the day before, she reading aloud to him the section of the “Friday” chapter in which the brothers begin their rapid homeward journey. “Now comes good sailing,” he whispered.

A little after seven that morning Judge Hoar paid a call, with some fresh hyacinths he had just picked in his garden. Thoreau sniffed them and managed to murmur, “I like them.” After the judge left, Thoreau began to exhibit the tell-tale restlessness. His mother, sister, and Aunt Louisa gathered around him for the familiar vigil. Sometime after eight he asked to be raised up. He spoke a little, mostly unintelligibly, though according to Channing, Sophia thought she could make out the words “moose” and “Indian.” Like his father before him, his breathing slowed imperceptibly, but by nine they knew he was gone. He was two months short of his forty-fifth birthday.

In his funeral elegy, Emerson referred to his friend’s “broken task,” a theme many of Thoreau’s survivors echoed. Yet there were other strains in the reaction to his dying.²³ The most obvious is that in dying young, a death eagerly disseminated by the eastern press, particularly by James T. Fields, who was soliciting from Thoreau revisions of his essays and papers for

posthumous publication in his *Atlantic*, as well as planning posthumous publications and re-publications of his books, Thoreau was generating the kind of widespread interest in his writing he had not enjoyed in his lifetime. Characteristically, a *New-York Daily Tribune* review of “Walking” published in the *Atlantic* on May 28, 1862, read, in part, “The quaint, characteristic essay [is] . . . by the late Henry Thoreau, whose recent decease imports an additional interest to every production of his unique pen.”²⁴ But more importantly, dying in the early part of the Civil War made Thoreau—known for radical abolitionism as well as his nature studies—a kind of war casualty himself, a martyr to his principles as well as to his poor lungs. In her letter to Ricketson, Sophia said of Emerson’s funeral elegy (about which she would have second thoughts once it appeared in *The Atlantic*): “It is a source of great satisfaction that one so gifted knew and loved my brother and is prepared to speak such brave words about him at this time” (Ricketson 151). In his Journal, Emerson’s epithet for Thoreau had frequently been “my brave Henry.” The etymology of the word brave has interesting valence in regard to Thoreau, his death, and the historical implications of his dying in 1862.

According to the OED “brave” not only means “courageous, intrepid, and stout-hearted” but also “worthy, excellent, good.” Obviously, Emerson would see the intrepid in a man who consistently immersed himself in his literary, activist, and nature pursuits despite all opposition and personal difficulty and Sophia would see the intrepid in Emerson’s eulogy of her brother who died in his mother’s comfortable parlor surrounded by adoring female relations at a time when so many were dying on the battlefield. But “brave” also carries that moral connotation of worthiness, excellence, and goodness. Thoreau’s timely/untimely death—“in the nick of time” like his birth, but also tragically early—resonates with other “brave” lives and deaths always in the minds of his contemporaries. In addition to the Union dead, the obvious connection would be

with the execution of John Brown, about which I will have more to say later. Another obvious echo would be the crucifixion.

In his *Jesus in America: Persona Savoir, Cultural Hero, National Obsession*, Richard W. Fox says, “In the 1840s Thoreau may have been the most radical dissenter on the subject of Jesus in all of America” (240) but goes on to say how frequently and easily Thoreau availed himself of the Christ imagery of his day. As David S. Reynolds has pointed out, Thoreau, setting the example for other abolitionists to follow, lustily employed the idea of the crucifixion in his depiction of John Brown’s martyrdom. Fox points out that it took some courage to directly and not by implication link Brown with Christ, and it was not until the assassination of Lincoln on Good Friday 1865 that pastors and journalists began to directly name a significant American their country’s own Jesus Christ whose virtuous life and sacrificial death were to become a liberating force for current and future generations. As Fox and Reynolds say, the combination of Brown’s execution and the Civil War dead made likeness to Jesus an easy association by May 1862. An example of the “Christifying” of Thoreau is an anonymous piece (probably written by Sanborn) published in *The Concord Monitor* May 17, 1862, using the Lord’s Supper imagery Thoreau himself used, albeit more skillfully, in some of his nature essays:

Few at first trod the path to the little house in the wood near Walden. Others now have found the way and the path is a beaten highway. Come, all of you, young and old, boy and girl, man and woman, along the path through the pines. Enter the simple door. Meekly bend your head and gratefully gather around the board he has spread for you. Drink the water he pores from the homely cup. He draws at the fountain of truth. Eat your fill of the bread he has broken and freely offers to all. This house is gone long ago; but

still by the shore he loved; the one that is true and pure enough can take the warm hand and feel the throb of the faithful heart of Henry D. Thoreau.²⁵

III

One is not often presented a Thoreau who is a creator of sentimental texts, but Thoreau often employed the devices of sentimental culture both in his writing and in his life. A familiar form of sentimental memorialization in the antebellum period was through the growing cottage industry of the photographic image. Among the earliest pieces were small carrying-case daguerreotypes of young women with memento mori verses hand-written on the inner lids. A typical poem from one of these cases was:

This is the likeness of Caroline Christ.

When I am dead and in my grave

And when my bones are rotten

When this you see remember me

Or I shall be forgotten. The grass is green

The rose is red.

Here is my name when I am dead.

Letherolfsville October 29 AD 1859

One would not associate such mawkish verse with the genteel if shabby Thoreau family, but the sentiments and the importance of images of those lost to the grave were a part of their family culture. Very famously, in the summer of 1841, as I have written, John Thoreau got five-year-old Waldo Emerson to pose for a traveling daguerreotypist, when no one else could get the little boy to stay still for the long exposure. Both little Waldo and John Jr. died the following January. His brother John was probably on Henry's mind in the spring of 1849 when his older

sister Helen was failing from consumption. Henry arranged to have a daguerreotypist come to the family home to make likenesses of both his sisters. These were the only pictures ever made of the Thoreau sisters and Helen died the following month. Sitting for the picture “was a tiring experience for Helen in her weakened condition but she was gratified by her brother’s thoughtfulness” (Harding 257).

Only three likenesses of Thoreau made in his lifetime survive: the 1854 Rowse crayon sketch, the 1856 Maxham daguerreotype, and the 1861 Dunshee ambrotype.²⁶ The Dunshee was made during Thoreau’s last visit to Ricketson in New Bedford in August, nine months before his death, and his family knew nothing about it at the time. When Sophia wrote to Ricketson to tell him the details of Henry’s death she asked him to send her a copy. In her letter of thanks she said, “Until a few weeks since, I did not know he had his picture taken in New Bedford last; he accidentally spoke of it, and said you considered it a good likeness.” I do not believe Thoreau mentioned the picture very “accidentally” at all, and I doubt Sophia believed it either. Just as he had thoughtfully had the image of the dying Helen made for her soon-to-be grieving family, he surely agreed to being photographed a last time when he was dying, knowing that the picture would eventually arrive to comfort his family. Sophia’s letter continues, “I need not tell you, for I cannot, how agreeably surprised I was on opening the little box, to find my own lost brother again. I could not restrain my tears. The picture is invaluable to us” (Ricketson 147).

Thoreau crafted his sentimental reading of himself to the music of this last sibling. In a series of novelistic repetitions in his Journal from fall 1851 to spring 1852 he returns three times to the same scene: himself in his attic room being pulled in the direction of the family parlor below by Sophia’s piano playing. On November 11 he tries to be disdainful: “When I have been confined to my chamber for the greater part of several days by some employment or perchance

the ague-till I felt weary and house-worn-I have become conscious of a certain softness to which I am otherwise & commonly a stranger-in which the gates were loosened to some emotions-And if I were to become a confirmed invalid I see how sympathy with mankind & society might spring up” (PJ 4: 176). As he wrote this he had nearly another decade before becoming a confirmed invalid, but he eerily anticipates the reality of his dying—his frailty finally bringing him downstairs to the parlor for good, where he would open himself to the tender ministrations of not only his womenfolk but many of his townspeople. On January 24 he is up in his attic room hearing Sophia at the piano again, and this time the music fills him with a sense of the loss of the youthful enthusiasms that music had once inspired in him. “I hear the tones of my sister’s piano below. It reminds me of strains which once I heard more frequently-when possessed with the inaudible rhythm I sought my chamber -& communed with my own thoughts. I feel as if then I received the gifts of the gods with too much indifference ...Now I hear those strains but seldom...I cannot dip my pen in it. I cannot work the vein it is so fine & volatile-Ah sweet ineffable reminiscences” (PJ 4: 281-282). Finally, as the spring comes, the feelings he spurned in November and mourned in January begin to work upon him. On April 11: “I hear the sound of the piano below as I write this and feel as if the winter in me were at length beginning to thaw-for my spring has been more backwards than nature’s. For a month past life has been a thing incredible to me. None but the kind gods can make me sane- If only they will let their south winds blow on me. I ask to be melted. You can only ask of the metals that they be tender to the fire that *melts* them.” (PJ 4: 434). Sophia’s parlor piano is drawing the gentle Thoreau from the misanthrope Thoreau.

In the room of the Concord Museum devoted to Thoreau’s possessions, such as the furniture he gathered and constructed for his Walden house, including the small bed on which he

died, is a glass case containing his flute and pencils he manufactured with his father, among other things. At one end of the case is an old wooden pen, its metal tip rusted away almost to nothing. Tied to it is a strip of paper on which is written in a fading woman's hand "The last pen brother Henry wrote with." Thoreau's amanuensis and in many ways his closest companion at the end of his life was Sophia. She was the most significant sentimental reader of his dying, and one of the early and important disseminators of the Thoreau character into American culture. Sophia drew the original cabin sketch for the cover of *Walden* and continued to run the family plumbago business, first with Henry, and later, after his decline and death, by herself. It was to his sister that Thoreau left all his papers, including his more than two-million word Journal. With the help of Emerson, Channing, Sanborn, and Blake, Sophia prepared what she could of those papers for publication. Upon her death in 1876 she willed them to Harrison Blake, and after his death, the papers began to scatter.

Shortly after Thoreau's death, the pilgrims began to come to Concord and Walden, often stopping at the Yellow House, where they were treated hospitably by Mrs. Thoreau and Sophia. Neither woman ever really recovered from Henry's death. Sophia wrote to Ricketson a year after his death: "I always reproach myself for any sadness in view of dear Henry's departure, knowing that the possession of such a priceless treasure as he was to us, for so long a time, should ever fill our hearts with gratitude. But I have passed the round of one year with no earthly friend to lean upon—the spring finds us in feeble health...I miss so much the counsel of my precious brother, who was never cast down and who in every emergency could make the light shine, that I confess, my heart at times is heavy" (Ricketson 156). She had written him on February 7 of that year: "You are evidently not aware that I have been recently called to pass through a most fiery trial. Seven weeks ago yesterday, my poor mother fell down our back stairway...shattering her right

arm frightfully, and otherwise seriously injuring herself. For an hour or two she was deprived of her senses, and during her insanity it was heartrending to me to hear her call almost incessantly for Henry, so sadly did I miss his strong arm and kind, brave heart in that dark hour” (154).

Sophia looked out for her brother not only in his literary remains but in the woods and fields around Concord which they had visited. In that sense, she too became a Thoreau pilgrim. She wrote again to Ricketson in December 1863 “I spend much time out of doors, visit Walden very often, and the other day I enticed my good aunt Jennie, who will be 79 years old Christmas Day, to accompany me to the pond. It gave her much satisfaction to visit the spot where dear Henry enjoyed so much. I walked up to the north part of the town lately, where his little house now stands [it was being used as a corncrib], and ate my dinner under its roof, with the mice for company” (159).

The Thoreau family, including Henry, was originally buried in the town churchyard. When Sleepy Hollow Cemetery was dedicated in the 1850s, Emerson had bought a large plot on a shaded hillside. On his death in 1864 Hawthorne was buried on the same hilltop and soon the Alcotts bought a neighboring plot. Barksdale Maynard writes, “Within a few years—probably 1866, certainly by 1868—Thoreau’s body (along with his family) was moved from the town burying ground to lie near the Hawthorne and Alcott plots, and Authors’ Ridge was born, another destination for the literary pilgrim. To dig the moldering coffins from the ground and cart them to Sleepy Hollow suggests the deliberateness with which Sophia Thoreau managed the memory of her beloved brother and sought to place him prominently before the public eye.”²⁷

The voluble and opinionated Mrs. Thoreau never recovered from her fall and remained something of an invalid for the last nine years of her life. Upon her death in 1872, Sophia sold the Yellow House, where the Thoreau family had lived since 1850, to the Alcotts, and moved to

Maine, where what family remained to her could care for her in her own decline. In 1876 her cousin George Thatcher, who had accompanied Thoreau on two of his Maine excursions, accompanied Sophia's body home to the family plot in Sleepy Hollow. Years before, after Sophia had moved the family bodies to Authors' Ridge, she "said, as she looked upon his low head-stone on the hillside, 'Concord is Henry's monument, covered with suitable inscriptions by his own hand.'"²⁸

IV

Of course Sophia's Thoreau was not everyone's Thoreau. Most especially, her sentimental reading of her brother bumped up against Emerson's heroic reading. Though at first very pleased with the address, her opinion began to change, especially in light of her collaboration with Emerson on her brother's *Letters to Various Persons*. In her February 2, 1863 letter to Ricketson she says of the printed version of the address, "You know he [Emerson] always eschewed pathos, and reading it for consolation as a stricken mourner, I felt somewhat disappointed. Henry never impressed me as the Stoic Mr. E. represents him. I think Henry was a person of much more faith than Mr. Emerson" (155). This impression of hers was heightened when Emerson assumed the editorship of the letters in 1865. She tells Ricketson that when she saw that some of her favorite passages of the letters had been omitted, those "betraying natural affection," she confronted Mrs. Emerson "who said her husband was a Greek, and treated his own writings in the same manner." Eventually the disputed passages were restored but Sophia wrote to Ricketson that Emerson had "*bragged* that the coming volume would be a most perfect piece of stoicism, and he feared I had marred his classic stature" (166).

In a century and a half many Thoreauvians have agreed with Sophia but I must take Emerson's part. I agree with Robert Richardson that "'Thoreau' is Emerson's last sustained

major piece of writing. A great prose elegy, as good in its way as ‘Lycidas,’ this is Emerson’s best, most personal biographical piece and it remains the best single piece yet written on Henry Thoreau.”²⁹ One can see “Thoreau” as Emerson’s final chapter of *Representative Men*. He has the philosopher, the skeptic, the writer, the poet, and the man of the world, but not until the death of “my brave Henry,” the only one of his representative men who was an American and whom he knew personally, does he have his stoic. As in the other representatives, Emerson sees two things: himself—all people—and some major flaw, which in Thoreau he labeled as a lack of ambition. But in emphasizing the stoic in Thoreau he is able to attend to what to him was his friend’s most distinctive characteristic: his heroism.

Very subtly, the address makes use of antebellum death culture. Making no direct allusions to Thoreau’s dying, of which his audience would have been well aware, he nevertheless twice mentions Thoreau’s “holy living,” implying that being “the bachelor of nature” and having “no vices” laid the groundwork for his cheerful virtue in dying.

In his address Emerson eulogizes three avatars of Henry David Thoreau: Henry, Mr. Thoreau, and Thoreau. Henry is the son, brother, and friend who grew to manhood among the scenes and neighbors of Concord. This intimate, often contrarian Henry “designed superior pencils” for a time, kindly told his friend’s teenaged daughter he hoped his upcoming lecture would please her, and “in any circumstance...it interested bystanders to know what part [Henry] would take... and he would not disappoint expectation.”³⁰

Mr. Thoreau was the writer and citizen. He used his foolproof logic to convince the Harvard president to extend library lending privileges to him, made “the fields, hills, and waters of his native town...known and interesting to all reading Americans and to people over the sea”

(1017), and gained the respect of his townspeople who had once castigated his oddities, by his skill in surveying and his encyclopedic knowledge of Concord's land, creatures, and history.

Thoreau is the hero, the prophet, the "true protestant," the mythology of whom Emerson is helping along. "Thoreau never faltered." "There was somewhat military in his nature...always manly and able." "No truer American existed than Thoreau." Thoreau had been among the first to recognize the iconic stature of John Brown, called together the townspeople in the vestry of the Unitarian Church, and "his earnest eulogy of the hero was heard by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves" (1014). I believe a significant reason Emerson insisted Thoreau's funeral be held at the First Parish Church Thoreau had "signed off" from years ago rather than outdoors was so he could eulogize Thoreau the hero in the same edifice where Thoreau had eulogized Brown the hero.

The Thoreauvian trinity of Emerson's eulogy interweaves but never overlaps. Though "Mr. Thoreau" created the library lending privileges for himself, it was because "Thoreau, and not the Librarian was the proper custodian" (1013) of those precious books. One would think "Henry" would be the one who would badly sprain his ankle in a fall on Mt. Washington, but that fall enabled "Thoreau," the prophet of nature, to discover a rare plant for which he had searched for years.

Two passages in the essay have bothered Thoreauvians for generations: "I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was captain of a huckleberry party" (1024-1025) and the strange ending which compares Thoreau to Tyrolese youths tempted to the tall cliffs to gather a flower called "life everlasting" and "noble purity" for their beloveds, and often being found "dead at the foot with the flower in his hand" (1027). The first passage, in addition to emphasizing the common

humanity in all great men by pointing out a flaw, also played well in an oral address at a funeral. No doubt it evoked affectionate chuckles from his auditors—Henry, after all, had spent much time gathering, talking, and writing about berries. Other passages in the address bear out that Emerson was trying to please family and friends. The “young girl” whom Henry had hoped would enjoy his lecture was Emerson’s own daughter, Edith; the “young man” about to head west and making a last visit to the dying Thoreau, who charged him with trying to find an old Indian who could explain how to make stone arrowheads, was Emerson’s son, Edward. Though Thoreau was not a man anyone would have called handsome, Emerson, to please his friend’s mother, sister, and aunts referred to Thoreau’s “becoming beard.”

All these details pleased the people in the audience as Sophia indicated in her initial response. However, its comfort did not translate well to text. Once printed, it lost its immediacy and seemed less a loving tribute to an odd but dear and brilliant friend, and more a statement of disappointment at a friend who had failed Emerson, the community, and himself. But most readers over the years have failed to underestimate the immense tribute Emerson was paying to Thoreau’s heroism, something both men had seen as a prime human virtue.

The young men dead at the end of the essay clutching “noble purity” and “life-everlasting” are self-referential. Emerson’s earlier telling of Thoreau spraining his ankle and discovering a rare plant at the same instant foreshadows Emerson’s conclusion. One does not easily associate botany with heroism, but Emerson knew Thoreau’s seeking after rare plants was no hobby or even acknowledged career—rather, Thoreau pursued nature as a holy and heroic quest. It was in nature that Thoreau found “noble purity” and a reference to dying at the instant of discovering the grail of nobility and purity, life everlasting, was an acknowledgement of Thoreau’s heroic death.

The title of this dissertation is “Thoreau’s Anticipation of Death” and I discussed Thoreau’s idea of anticipation as prophecy in my Introduction. Always, as I have said, Thoreau looked for the past and future seasons in the constant-motion present season. Natural time has no present, or rather, an eternal present. Human time, however, is linear and we must eventually die out of nature. Yet the death in nature Thoreau studied implied more a dying “into” nature—the falling leaves, the forests supplanting one another, and even in some extraordinary instances, the human hero dying so other heroes will sprout in his place. But unlike the Not Me of nature, a human consciousness cannot simply die into nature. Where, then, does it go?

In a May Journal entry in 1858, Thoreau wrote of hearing his neighbor’s voice at a distance. “I know that this sound was made by the lungs and larynx of E. Wood...he can impress himself on the very atmosphere, and then can launch himself a mile on the wind...and yet arrive distinct to my ear...and yet this creature that is felt so far, that was so noticeable, lives but a short time, quietly dies, and makes no more noise that I know of” (J X: 426). This metaphysical conundrum plagued Thoreau off and on his whole life. During his last winter he whispered to Ellery Channing as they sat by the frost-covered window, “I cannot see on the outside at all. We thought ourselves great philosophers in those wet days when we used to go outside and sit down by these wall-sides.”³¹ The question this raises is, are they no longer philosophers because they do not sit in the wet? Is there some eternal present where the two philosophers still sit by the side of those walls (and Elijah Wood’s pipes still impress the atmosphere)?

The closest Thoreau could come to a solution to this unanswerable question was his prolonged state of liminality as he was slowly dying. As his physical body wasted away his consciousness remained—in a sense he was both alive and dead in a perfect state of transition.

And he was in no hurry for it to end. Unlike his father, who had been impatient to depart once he had taken leave of his family several times, Thoreau to the end was interested and amused. He had his family re-arrange the furniture in the parlor so he could study the unfamiliar shadows in the night as his lungs kept him awake. He told his sister, “Sophia, my knees look like balls on string,—I go on as if I were to stay a thousand years. I do enjoy myself” (Ricketson 156). Some readers of his dying text have questioned the exultation he felt in his last months. William Howarth credits it to his high fever (218). Yet I think this exultation was a direct result of his prolonged experience of the transition from physical to mystical—beyond change, beyond war, he lingered as mindfully as he always lived, finally not the least bit interested in catching a glimpse of the other shore.

Because “one world at a time” is always quoted and frequently out of context, I think the whole conversation, as well as the carefully remembered setting, bears recording. While preparing one of his several Thoreau biographies, Franklin Sanborn wrote to the old abolitionist Unitarian minister and Thoreau family friend, Parker Pillsbury, requesting details of his last visit with Thoreau. Pillsbury responded:

He sat pillowed in an easy chair. Behind him stood his patient, dear, devoted mother, with a fan in one hand, and a phial of ammonia or cologne in the other, to sustain him in the warm morning. At the table near him, piled high with his papers and articles related to them and him, sat his sister arranging them, as I understood, for Ticknor and Fields, who had been to Concord and bought the copyright. When I entered Thoreau was looking deathly weak and pale. I saw my way for but the fewest words. I said, as I took his hand, “I suppose this is the best you can do now.” He smiled and only nodded, and gasped a faint assent. “The outworks,” I said, “seem almost ready to give way.” Then a smile

shone on his pale face and with an effort he said, “Yes,--but as long as she cracks she holds” (a common saying of boys skating). Then I spoke only once more to him, and I cannot remember my exact words. But I think my question was substantially this: “You seem so near the dark river, that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.” Then he answered: “One world at a time.”³²

“One world at a time” may be Thoreau’s most famous dying words, but “as long as she cracks she holds” is an extraordinarily nuanced response on Thoreau’s part. Most obviously, he is saying “one world at a time” in provincial language, further localizing himself to the very specific time and place of his dying. By expressing the sentiment twice, he is emphasizing that however frail and fading his frame is, his consciousness is still firmly in this world, and he is maintaining his identity with the woods, waters, and meadows of Concord. His reference here is that as long as winter holds, spring, in the form of the breaking up of the ice, is kept at bay. Winter is dying for spring to be born but Thoreau is not yet completely ready to die out of nature. The bluebirds may have returned, the judge is picking hyacinths in his garden, but Parker Pillsbury and all of us must wait on nature’s good time for winter to go about its dying.

1 David S. Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Right*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) 381.

2 In fact, to this day, academics can only appreciate the sentimental if they can read a subversive subtext into it, but never for its own sake, as what was once an acceptable way of viewing the world.

3 Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001) 387-388.

4 Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, "Thoreau and Alcott" ed. Dr. Samuel Arthur Jones, *Thoreau Amongst Friends and Philistines and Other Thoreauviana*. Reprint. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982) 182-183.

5 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Harvard University Press, 1995) 336.

6Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 1982)

7 Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 56.

8 Lewis O. Saum, "Death in Pre-Civil War America" in *Death in America* ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press) 41.

9 Anna and Walton Ricketson, eds. *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902) 141.

10 Robert D. Richardson Jr. *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986) 334-336.

11 Henry David Thoreau, *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* ed. Bradley P. Dean (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004) 118-119.

12 William Howarth, *The Book of Concord* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982) 63.

13 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau" in *Essays & Poems* eds. Joel Porte, Harold Bloom, and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1996)

14 In my chapter on sentimentality and death in Thoreau I discussed how frequently Thoreau was identified as "feminine." In this instance he is taking an interesting position in that it was believed that too much writing could be dangerous, even fatal to a woman.

15 Unless otherwise noted, all the details of his death are from Sophia's letters to Daniel Ricketson.

16 In *Transcendental Wordplay* Michael West points out that in all his years of illness, including his final illness, Thoreau never used the word "consumption" to describe his disease—a common omission among nineteenth century consumptives.

17 Young Mann's promising career as a naturalist and Harvard professor ended tragically young, at age twenty-four, of consumption he may have caught while traveling with Thoreau.

18 Quoted in Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* .460.

19 Quoted in Harding, p. 456.

20 Channing, *Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist*.

21Ibid.

22 Mary Hosmer Brown, *Memories of Concord* (Boston: The Four Seasons Press, 1926) 106.

23Though not the writer Emerson was, Channing was much closer to Thoreau in the last dozen years of his life. Alcott and Sanborn both believed Channing in all his long life never recovered from Thoreau's death, but he didn't see his friend's early death representing a "broken task." Instead, Thoreau's death leaves his survivors' tasks broken. He concludes a memorial sonnet he published in *The Concord Monitor* May 10, 1862 in what seems a counter to Emerson's remark: "THOREAU! 't'were shame to weep above thy grave,/Or doubtingly thy soul's far flight pursue;/Peace and delight must there await the brave,/And love attend the loving, wise, and true./ Thy well-kept vows our broken aims shall mend,/Oft as we think on thee, great-hearted friend!"

24Raymond Borst, *Henry David Thoreau: A Reference Guide1835-1899* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987)

25Reprinted in *ESQ*, no. 2. 1st Quarter 1965.

26 The fact that Sophia wrote to Ricketson after he sent her the Dunshee that she "liked it better than his other daguerreotypes" indicates there were probably more that are lost now.

27 W. Barksdale Maynard, *Walden Pond: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 158-159.

28 Franklin B. Sanborn, *Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882) Reprint Chelsea House Publishers, 1980. 317.

29Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995) 548.

30 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Poems* (New York: Library of America, 1996) 1012.

31Quoted in Maynard, 148.

32 Franklin Sanborn, *The Personality of Thoreau* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1901) 69.

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