

Thoreau's Quest for Immortality

by

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## Abstract

Thoreau's famous saying, "One world at a time," was not the philosophy by which he lived; on the contrary, the central search of his life was for indications in nature that there is an after-life toward which all men are bound. It was because he was deeply concerned with the fate of his brother's soul that he asserted that mortality is only an appearance, and that man's true nature is immortal. John Thoreau, Jr., had died in Henry's arms in 1842, and the effect this had on him was permanent. Being a Transcendentalist, Thoreau did not go to scripture for consolation regarding death; nevertheless, he wanted the same solace that Christianity offered--the assurance that friends would meet again in paradise. Thus, on the basis of both the Transcendentalist theory of correspondences, and the trust in the validity of personal intuition, he formulated his own theory of a sensuous hereafter. His search for suggestions that such a realm exists is strongest in his first book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, which was intended as a memorial to John, and which I treat as a metaphorical account of the soul's journey to its eternal home. The voyage the book describes, its structure, and the themes of its digressions all combine to persuade the reader that there is another world to which the soul goes after death. Although the theme of immortality is most pervasive in A Week, other of Thoreau's writings also show his desire

to find proof of, and even experience, eternity. Because he wrote as a prophet who was reminding his fellow man of his spiritual nature and destination, Thoreau's writings are basically religious. Throughout his life he went to nature not as materialist, but as a supernaturalist. He endeavoured, by immersing himself in the eternity already present in this world, to live in a manner befitting an immortal being. His concern with immortality was reinforced by his social and intellectual milieu--particularity Transcendentalism. In his last days he said, "Yes! this is a beautiful world; but I shall see a fairer."

To My Father, Who Has Lost Two Brothers,  
and to My Friend  
John MacDougall, Who Has Lost One

"One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die."

--Donne, Holy Sonnet 10

"We are dying, we are dying, so all we can do  
is now to be willing to die, and to build the ship  
of death to carry the soul on the longest journey."

--D. H. Lawrence, "The Ship of Death"

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## Chronology of Henry Thoreau

- 1817 Born July 12 in Concord, Massachusetts.
- 1833 Entered Harvard.
- 1837 Spent summer vacation with Stearns Wheeler at Flint's Pond. Graduated from Harvard. Briefly taught public school in Concord. Friendship with Emerson began.
- 1838 Opened his own school, which lasted until 1841.
- 1839 His brother John joined Henry in teaching at the school. Voyaged with him on the rivers.
- 1841 Moved into the Emersons' home, where he stayed two years.
- 1842 His brother John and Emerson's eldest child, Waldo, both died in January.
- 1843 His friend Stearns Wheeler died.
- 1845 Moved to Walden Pond on Independence Day.
- 1847 Left Walden.
- 1849 A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers was published. Helen Thoreau, Henry's elder sister, died.
- 1854 Walden was published.
- 1854-61 Many excursions--Massachusetts, Maine, Minnesota.
- 1862 Died May 6, in Concord.

## Acknowledgements

Of the many critics cited throughout this work, I have learned the most from Walter Harding. If the bibliography were arranged according to appreciation, his name would be at the top.

Also, I am grateful to Dr. William G. Heath, Jr., my thesis supervisor, for allowing me to write at my own pace. The resulting "broad margin" of leisure gave me time to do such things as travel to Concord in the summer of 1978.

Finally, I thank my wife Judy, who first encouraged me to major in literature, did my share of dish washing and diaper changing while I attended graduate school, and put up with me while I brooded over this thesis.

## Introduction

Probably the most frequently repeated anecdotes concerning Thoreau are those two that show him in his final days. One of the stories is that when his aunt asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarrelled."<sup>1</sup> The other anecdote is that when he was asked by an acquaintance whether, being so near the brink of death, he had any words on how the other side appeared, Thoreau answered, "One world at a time."<sup>2</sup> These anecdotes, considered alongside Thoreau's usually caustic references to institutional religion and his formal signing off from the church, at first glance suggest a lack of serious concern with spiritual things. More particularly, "One world at a time" seems to indicate that Thoreau never thought about the afterlife. Actually, however, spiritual concerns were at the very center of Thoreau's life and writings.<sup>3</sup> Although his religious world view manifests itself throughout his life, and in all of his works, it is most clear in the period following his brother's

<sup>1</sup> Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 464.

<sup>2</sup> Harding, Days, p. 465.

<sup>3</sup> John Sylvester Smith, "The Theological Naturism of Henry David Thoreau with Special Reference to Its Epistemological Presuppositions and Theological Implications," Diss. Drew University, 1948, p. v.

death in 1842--particularly in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (1849).

The student who bases his opinion on the anecdotes mentioned above, and does not look deeper into Thoreau's writings, is left with the same impression as that held by Thoreau's neighbours, who thought of him as the village atheist. As a result, Thoreau's naturalism is wrongly interpreted as a philosophy of materialism. Although no longer intended to be disparaging, this view of Thoreau as a materialist is still prevalent today, even among prominent critics. Professor Joel Porte, for example, argues that Thoreau lived only for the reality that links man to this world, that his only concern was for physical experience. He states that Thoreau "never felt obliged to turn his thoughts to another world."<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to this view, I maintain that the other world was one of Thoreau's chief concerns. This is revealed both by the facts of his life and the themes of his writings. In terms of Thoreau's life, the death of his brother and his reactions to it are most important; in terms of his works, A Week--which was both his first book and his memorial to his brother John--most consistently shows his concern for the other world--the hereafter.

Both Thoreau's strong faith in immortality and the manifestation of this faith in his writings have been noted before. Half a century ago, in 1929, Raymond Adams, who later became president

<sup>4</sup> Joel Porte, "'God himself culminates in the present moment': Thoughts on Thoreau's Faith, Thoreau Society Bulletin, No. 144. (Summer 1978), p. 4.

of the Thoreau Society, published an article entitled "Thoreau and Immortality." It is still one of the best introductions to the subject. In it, Adams notes that Thoreau's apparent unconcern about the other world was more a facade he projected than it was real. He asserts, "Thoreau did think of more than one world at a time ...."<sup>5</sup> Yet, as many people do, Thoreau "assumed an unconcern toward the very things that he most hungered for."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps another reason for his apparent indifference was his belief that religion is "That which is never spoken."<sup>7</sup> Thus he often hid his opinions on matters of faith in his journal and his letters. When the subject of the afterlife does appear in the public writings it is usually treated indirectly--beneath the veil of metaphor for example. Nevertheless, there are some passages--most of them in A Week--where his quest for immortality is explicitly expressed. Adams concludes his article by stating, "The young Concord radical who renounced the church still thought much about his soul and immortality, and wrote much about it too."<sup>8</sup>

Although Adams had the acumen to point out Thoreau's interest in immortality, he did not assign any reasons as to why Thoreau

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Adams, "Thoreau and Immortality," Studies in Philology, 26 (January 1929), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Adams, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Henry David Thoreau, The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, 14 vols. bound as 2, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (1906; rpt. New York: Dover, 1962), XI, 113. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, p. 66.

wrote as much as he did on the subject. Another critic who wrote on Thoreau in 1929, although he did not discuss his writings, made clear how influenced Henry was by John's death. In his article entitled "Two Brothers," R. C. Francis points out that the death of John had a profound effect on Henry's personality and caused him to wrestle with his grief for many years, until he finally found, in nature, the source of new life.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas Adams had pointed out Thoreau's literary concern with immortality, and Francis had noted the biographical cause of Henry's grief, it was not until Perry Miller's Consciousness in Concord (1958) that a connection was explicitly made between John's death and the theme of immortality in Thoreau's writings. Miller notes, for example, that the themes of Walden were "predetermined" by Thoreau's experiences with death: after having pointed out the more direct dealings with death in nineteenth-century village life, he writes, "So the great book--the only book Thoreau could compile--would have to be, even though cunningly disguised, a song of death and a paean of resurrection: 'Walden was dead and is <sup>again</sup> alive,'"<sup>10</sup>

Although accurate in perceiving the essence of Walden, Miller missed the mark when he says of A Week that "death is conspicuously evaded,"<sup>11</sup> for of all Thoreau's works, it is the most filled with

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Francis, "Two Brothers," Dalhousie Review, 9 (1929), 51-53.

<sup>10</sup> Perry Miller, Consciousness in Concord (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, Consciousness, p. 67.

attempts to deal with mortality. It is my intention to show that A Week is Thoreau's account of his quest for proof of man's immortality.

Thus, in the first chapter of this thesis I begin by showing the close bonds between Henry and his brother John. This should make clear why Thoreau was permanently affected by John's death. My assumption is that a biographical investigation is a legitimate approach to a writer. Indeed, Walter Harding notes, "With Thoreau, perhaps more than with any other major writer, it is absolutely essential to understand the man first if we are to fully understand his work."<sup>12</sup> That Thoreau's personal experience did directly influence his writing, I make clear in the second half of this chapter, by showing Thoreau's beginning, in his letters and journal entries of the months following John's death, to work out a philosophy of an afterlife.

In the second chapter I discuss A Week, which, on account of its being written in the first years after John's death, and its having as its subject the last and most memorable vacation Henry and John had taken together, is strongly influenced by Thoreau's grief. I suggest that Thoreau's concern with the soul's pilgrimage to the hereafter shows itself in both the theme and the form of the book.

Finally, in the last chapter, I show that Thoreau's religious

<sup>12</sup> Walter Harding, ed., Henry David Thoreau: A Profile (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), p. xiv.

concern with the afterlife was not confined to A Week, but manifests itself in many of his writings and was a central part of his life. I suggest that the reasons for his desiring a natural proof of everlasting life were, like the particulars of the realm he believed in, largely influenced by the ideas of Transcendentalism.

## Chapter One

Brother where dost thou dwell?  
What sun shines for thee now?  
Dost thou indeed farewell?  
As we wished here below.  
--Thoreau, Collected Poems

### I

Born only two years apart, Henry and his elder brother John were virtually inseparable. In his journal, Henry recalls many incidents concerning their childhood: in one entry he describes how each child had his own garden, how a bladder John was playing with burst on the hearth, how he and John caught an eel together, and so on (J, VIII, 94). When they were school age, the two brothers received their education together in the single room of the Concord public schoolhouse; when it was closed for the term, their mother sent them to the girls' school of Phoebe Wheeler for extra learning. In summer and early autumn they both walked to classes barefoot.<sup>13</sup> At night they slept together in their trundlebed--a children's bed on large casters that was slid under the parents' bed during the day.

Many of the interests that Henry showed in his later writing were originally John's. Henry himself acknowledges this in an

<sup>13</sup> F. B. Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau (1917; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1968), p. 39.

elegy for his brother, where he writes, "I always lagged behind, / While thou wert ever first."<sup>14</sup> It was no doubt John, an amateur naturalist, who first introduced Henry to the fields, woods, and streams of Concord.<sup>15</sup> They did the things most boys do: they shot birds and squirrels and speared fish with spears they had made themselves.<sup>16</sup> As they matured, they turned to gentler relationships with nature. John kept an elaborate list of native birds that served as Henry's first ornithological textbook;<sup>17</sup> when John died this book was passed on to Henry.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, one critic notes that for Henry birds became an emblem of John.<sup>19</sup> In the poem Thoreau wrote to express his grief for the loss of his brother, he calls him the birds' "former lord" and asks, "What bird wilt thou employ / To bring me word of thee?"<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it was some fantastic hope that birds could somehow connect him with his brother that caused him to so eagerly await their arrival every spring.

Thoreau's interest in Indians can also be traced to John.

<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau, ed. Carl Bode, enlarged edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966) p. 316.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (1948; rpt. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (1939; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965), p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Canby, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Canby, p. 164.

<sup>19</sup> Francis, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 152.

For instance, in 1838, when John was teaching in another town, he sent Henry a large box of Indian relics.<sup>21</sup> The year before, Henry had written his brother a letter throughout which he pretended that they were both Indians. He calls himself "Tahatawan" and Concord, "Musketaquid." One of the paragraphs in this letter is especially interesting, not only as proof of Thoreau's interest in the afterlife, but as an indication that his own conception of the other world perhaps grew out of his awareness of the earth-like heaven that the Indians believed in. Also, the passage is an unconscious augury of John's death:

Brother--I write thee these things because I know that thou lovest the Great Spirit's creatures, and wast wont to sit at thy lodge door--when the maize was green--to hear the bluebird's song. So shalt thou in the land of spirits, not only find good hunting grounds and sharp arrowheads--but much music of birds.<sup>22</sup>

It was this same fall of 1837 that, as they one evening neared the river toward the end of a Sunday walk, during which the brothers had been imagining the Indians that had once inhabited the area, Henry, inspired by the theme, playfully exclaimed, "There on Nawshawtuct was their lodge, the rendezvous of the tribe, and yonder, on Clamshell Hill, their feasting ground. . . . Here stood Tahatawan; and there . . . is Tahatawan's arrowhead" (J, I, 7■). They then sat down at the spot to which Henry had pointed

<sup>21</sup> Henry David Thoreau, The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 16.

and, to continue the joke, Henry picked up a stone--to his amazement it was a perfect arrowhead. There must have been other such special moments that John and Henry shared; as a result, in Thoreau's mind the Indian became associated with his brother. Indeed, one critic says of the subject, "Henry's preoccupation with, and pursuit of, the Indian after John's death was in fact an attempt to assert identification with his fallen brother."<sup>23</sup> Thus Thoreau made three trips to the Maine woods after John had died, and by the time he himself died his collection of Indian relics had grown to about nine hundred.<sup>24</sup> One reason, then, that Thoreau pursued nature and the Indian was that he wanted to more closely associate with the spirit of his brother.

The strong influence of John on Henry is also apparent in more social areas than his love of nature. For instance, the flute that Thoreau loved to play, and that he mentions throughout his writings, was originally John's.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it was probably John who taught him to play it.<sup>26</sup> That he associated the flute with John is undeniable--even eight years after John's death he wrote in his journal, "I have heard my brother playing on his flute at evening half a mile off through the houses of the village, every

<sup>23</sup> Richard Lebeaux, Young Man Thoreau (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Harding, Days, p. 427.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Emerson, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend (1917; rpt. Concord, Mass.: Thoreau Foundation, 1968) p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Canby, p. 33.

note with perfect distinctness. It seemed a more beautiful communication with me than the sending up of a rocket would have been" (J, II, 12). Evidently, Henry did not enjoy being separated from his brother even before his death, for his interpreting John's music as being intended specifically for himself shows his need to feel connected with him. In Walden Thoreau describes how his flute-playing woke the echoes over the pond, and how on warm summer nights he would often row out and then play under the moon.<sup>27</sup> Robert Francis suggests that Thoreau was hoping that his brother, in another sphere, would hear him.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the two brothers wandered in nature together and caused melodies to waft from the same flute. Like other men, however, they also had to earn a living. Yet even in the realm of work they managed to be together. Both were teachers, and their happiest years were those in which they ran their own school. In 1837, Henry, after only two weeks of teaching in the Concord public school, had resigned when he learned that he was expected to flog the students. In 1838 he opened his own school. Enrollment increased enough so that in the beginning of 1839 John joined his brother, and the two created a school that was far ahead of its time. All the traditional subjects were taught of course, but there were many innovations: free tuition for those whose parents could not

<sup>27</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, Walden, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 155-56, 174. All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Francis, p. 53.

afford to pay, no corporal punishment, a half-hour for recess, and frequent field trips. In the winter the teachers skated with their pupils and in the summer they sailed with them.<sup>29</sup>

Walter Harding recounts two anecdotes concerning the Thoreaus' school which show that a religious view of life was taught there. The first reveals Henry's faith in natural theology--reasoning from nature as a means to spiritual knowledge:

On another occasion he spoke of the certainty of the existence of a wise and friendly power overlooking all. He asked the children: if they should go into a shop and see all the nicely finished wheels, pinions, springs, and frame pieces of a watch lying spread out on a bench and again came to find them put together exactly and working in unison to move the hands on a dial and show the passage of time, whether they could believe that this had come about by chance or rather thought that somebody with thought and plan and power had been there.<sup>30</sup>

The other anecdote shows Henry's Transcendental faith in the goodness of the universe put to the test of explaining death.

Once when Thoreau in his enthusiasm for the wonders of nature announced that "everything was a miracle," one of the more skeptical pupils, announcing that he had recently cleaned some fish and thrown their heads into the garbage, wanted to know if that act was <sup>ere</sup> a miracle. Thoreau replied, "Yes," but refused to make any further explanation, apparently thus hoping to squelch the boy's sarcasm.<sup>31</sup>

Whether Thoreau at that time actually believed that death was as

<sup>29</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 75-88.

<sup>30</sup> Harding, Days, p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Harding, Days, p. 81.

much a miracle as life is not known. By the time he finished A Week, however, and then until the end of his life, he had no doubts that it was.

Although it had been very successful, the school closed in April of 1841. John, who had long been in poor health (he was slowly being consumed by tuberculosis), had faded to 117 pounds and no longer had the strength to teach.<sup>32</sup> Even though the school had been founded by Henry, he did not want to carry on without his brother.

Notwithstanding John and Henry's teaching in the same school during the day and living in the same home at night, they vacationed together as well. It was in late summer of 1839, before the autumn term began, that they went on their famous vacation--the boat trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. They had built a boat that spring and were eager to make good use of it. Thus they left on August 31, and, after five days of rowing and sailing--with plenty of stops for exploring, talking with new acquaintances, resting in the shade of trees, and swimming--they arrived in Concord, New Hampshire, about seventy miles from their own Concord. They then travelled overland, first by stage and then by foot, to Mount Washington, the highest peak in New England. After climbing it, they began to retrace their route home, and arrived back on the thirteenth of September.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Harding, Days, p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 88-93.

The serene rivers and lofty mountains had made it a memorable trip; as Robert Francis notes, however, the best part was that "each had in the other his first choice of companion."<sup>34</sup> Yet, only two and a half years later, John was dead. For Henry this last long holiday they had together eventually became a symbol of their love.<sup>35</sup> It was therefore inevitable that his first book would be a memorial to John. Furthermore, because he never let his love for his brother die, the spirit of John is evident in his later writings as well.

Perhaps it was unavoidable that brothers as close as John and Henry, who were accustomed to doing everything else together, would also fall in love at the same time--and with the same girl. Ellen Sewall, whose family lived in the seacoast town of Scituate, was seventeen when she came to Concord in July of 1839 for a two-week visit with her aunt, who boarded at the Thoreaus'. Henry and John, both in their early twenties, immediately fell for this "lovely young lady," as Henry calls her in his journal (J, I, 144). Henry even carved her name together with his initials on a bridge.<sup>36</sup>

It was summer vacation and the brothers made the most of it: they took Ellen sailing on the river, walked with her to Walden Pond, and went berrying. Henry sent her love poems, and his journal entry for July 25 is a single line--"There is no remedy for

<sup>34</sup> Francis, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Harding, Days, p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> Harding, Days, p. 99.

love but to love more" (J, I, 88). The visit soon ended though, and when Ellen left for home in early August she cried.<sup>37</sup> A few weeks later, when Henry and John left for their vacation on the rivers, they were both still in love with her.

Ellen was not forgotten, however, for when the brothers returned from their trip in mid-September John immediately left to visit her. (Her parents were visiting Niagara Falls at the time.)<sup>38</sup> When Christmas came, both brothers went to visit her, and over the winter they sent gifts and letters. John, in one of his letters, instructed Ellen's little brother to give her a kiss for him; Henry, in one of his, lectured her against using coffee and tea.<sup>39</sup>

In June, Ellen came to Concord again and once more had an idyllic time. In July, by which time she had returned to Scituate, John again went to visit her, and while they were walking on the beach, he proposed. Although at first accepting, she soon changed her mind, for she realized that her father, a conservative Unitarian, would not approve of a match with a Transcendentalist. In early November Henry himself proposed to Ellen--by letter. She wrote her aunt that her father had told her to respond in a "'short, explicit

<sup>37</sup> Harding, Days, p. 96.

<sup>38</sup> Harding, Days, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Harding, Days, p. 98.

and cold manner to Mr. T.'"<sup>40</sup> Thereafter, Ellen's parents carefully kept her away from the Thoreau brothers.

Lebeaux, arguing his thesis that there was deep rivalry between John and Henry, suggests that Henry "felt rage" in regard to his brother's interest in Ellen.<sup>41</sup> It is quite unlikely though that Thoreau was enraged, for although hostility might have arisen if John had won out over him, the fact is that neither of the two was successful in his courtship. Not only did they love the same girl, but they were both rejected by her. The bittersweet memories of their romance with Ellen would have been one more bond between them.

Not only did the brothers play, learn, work, and court under each other's influence--in short, establish their identities together--but they were also literary companions. In A Week, for example, Thoreau describes how, after the day's rowing, and after the fire that had warmed their supper had been put out, they would retire into their tent, where, with a buffalo skin covering the ground and a lantern hanging from the tent pole, they would "write the journal of the voyage."<sup>42</sup> They must have ended every day with journal writing, for Thoreau mentions it at the end of three of the

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Sewall, Letter to Prudence Ward November 18, 1840. MS, George L. Davenport, Jr., in Harding, Days, p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Lebeaux, p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Vol. I of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 119. All further references to this work appear in the text.

seven chapters that describe their trip. It was a ritual which they had to perform before they could sleep. As Stanley Cavell points out, when Thoreau writes in Walden, "I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too . . ." (17), the stick represents his writing.<sup>43</sup> For Thoreau, merely experiencing life is not enough; rather, having thoughts about experience, and then writing them down, is the best work man can do. It is significant then, that in Thoreau's deciding to be a writer, John may have been an influence, for he was as serious in his writing as Henry. The daily entries in the surviving pages of his journal are usually quite long--one entry runs to over five hundred words. Thomas Blanding suggests that John may have even been the first of the two to keep a journal, and that it may be ~~him~~<sup>he</sup>, and not Emerson, to whom Thoreau refers on the first page of his own journal:<sup>44</sup>

"'What are you doing now?' he asked. 'Do you keep a journal?' So I make my first entry to-day" (J, I, 1).

Although only five leaves of John's journal are extant, they sufficiently show how much the two brothers influenced each other intellectually. There are passages on such topics as the therapeutic effect of nature, the advantages of an economy in language, the "mean and unworthy lives" of his fellow men, and the defini-

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Cavell, The Senses of Walden (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Blanding, "Passages from John Threau, Jr.'s Journal," Thoreau Society Bulletin, No. 36 (Summer 1976), p. 4.

tion of poverty. John's discussion of poverty sounds especially like Henry, both because of the idea expressed and the use of paradox: "Pray what is it to be poor? . . . You are now possessed of ten thousand dollars, and want a hundred thousand. I have not money, and desire none; then are you poorer than myself. . . . Want then is poverty He only is rich who has no desires."<sup>45</sup> Henry himself eventually summed up this idea in his statement "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (Walden, 82). Thus, Henry and John were intellectually as well as emotionally compatible.

Being an intelligent young man, John was as welcome at the Emersons' as was his brother, and he frequently visited. There, when he was not occupied with such kind acts as building a blue-bird box for the Emersons' barn, or taking little Waldo to a daguerreotypist,<sup>46</sup> he would have been assimilating the large and noble ideas of Emerson. That John did have worthy thoughts, already shown in the journal passage quoted above, is further evidenced by his participation in the Concord Lyceum. On January 27, 1841, for instance, he and Henry (again they were together) debated Bronson Alcott on the topic of whether forcible resistance is ever justified.<sup>47</sup> John was definitely one of those whom Emerson called "Man

<sup>45</sup> John Thoreau's journal for July 22, 1840, quoted in Blanding, "Passages," p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Emerson, Emerson in Concord (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), pp. 128-29.

<sup>47</sup> Harding, Days, p. 142.

Thinking." In fact, most of Concord expected John to be more of a success than Henry.<sup>48</sup> And Blanding, in his discussion of John's journal, even says that if John had not died, "he might have matched Henry in the end."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, John's seriousness about writing showed itself even on his deathbed, when, in a state of delirium, he thought he had written something, and wanted to take it to a friend to read.<sup>50</sup> As it was, Henry lived to become the great writer; yet his interest in writing itself, and many of the ideas that distinguish his works, can be traced to John.

After the brothers' school had closed on April 1, 1841, Henry and John made the best of their freedom. John, hoping to improve his health, immediately went on an excursion to New Hampshire;<sup>51</sup> Henry, by the end of the month, moved in with the Emersons, where he was given free room and board in exchange for his helping for a few hours a day with the garden and the house.<sup>52</sup> He set his own schedule, and had enough time to read, write, and play with the Emerson children. Best of all, he was still only a few minutes' walk away from home, where he would often go for whole days at a

<sup>48</sup> Harding, Days, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Blanding, "Passages," p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> An unnamed correspondent to William S. Robinson, letter of February 2, 1842, in Mrs. W. S. Robinson, "Warrington" Pen-Portraits (Boston: Mrs. W. S. Robinson, 1877), pp. 12-13; rpt. in Max Cosman, "Apropos of John Thoreau," American Literature, 12 (1940), 242.

<sup>51</sup> Harding, Days, p. 88.

<sup>52</sup> Harding, Days, p. 127.

time. And John, of course, was often over at the Emersons' himself. Thus both brothers had the greatest liberty to enjoy life. More importantly, John's health had not deteriorated any further. The seasons passed peacefully and pleasantly.

It was completely unexpected then, when John, only twenty-six, died on January 11, 1842. The outrage of his dying so young was compounded by the cause—a slight cut to his finger sustained while he was stropping his razor on New Year's Day. Hardly deep enough to cause bleeding, it was soon forgotten. A week later, however, the cut had not healed well, so John went on Friday evening to the doctor, who, noticing nothing unusual, dressed the finger and sent John off. On his way home, however, he suffered such severe pain that he hardly made it back. When his jaws became stiff the next morning it was obvious that he had tetanus, and that night the convulsions began.<sup>53</sup>

John's reaction to knowing his certain fate is recorded in the letter written by an anonymous correspondent to William S. Robinson, a friend of John's:

On being told that he must die a speedy and painful death, he was unmoved. "Is there no hope?" he said. "None," replied the doctor. Then, although his friends were almost distracted around him, he was calm, saying, "The cup that my Father gives me, shall I not drink it?" . . . He died Tuesday, at two o'clock, P.M., with as much cheerfulness . . . as if only going a short journey.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> The letter to Robinson in Cosman, p. 242.

<sup>54</sup> The letter to Robinson in Cosman, pp. 242-43.

The same religious acceptance on John's part is also described by Lidian Emerson, in two letters written to her sister. The initial half of the first letter was written on the evening that John died. She writes of John,

He said from the first he knew he should die, but was perfectly quiet and trustful, saying that God had always been good to him and he could trust Him now. . . . John took leave of all the family on Monday with perfect calmness and more than resignation.<sup>55</sup> . . . I feel as if a pure spirit had been translated.

In the second letter, written a few days after John's funeral, she gives additional details that she had learned from Henry:

I asked him if this sudden fate gave any shock to John when he first was aware of his danger. He said "none at all." After J. had taken leave of all the family he said to Henry now sit down and talk to me of Nature and Poetry, I shall be a good listener for it is difficult for me to interrupt you. During the hour in which he died, he looked at Henry with "a transcendent smile full of Heaven" (I think this was H's expression) and Henry "found himself returning it" and this was the last communication that passed between them.<sup>56</sup>

Emotionally, then, John took his dying calmly, and would thereby have eased somewhat the suffering of his family; physically, though, he would not have been able to hide his agony, for in the final stages of tetanus there are convulsions so severe that the person

<sup>55</sup> Letter of Lidian Emerson to Lucy Jackson Brown, in Joel Myerson, "More Apropos of John Thoreau," American Literature 45 (March 1973), 105.

<sup>56</sup> Letter of Lidian Emerson, in Myerson, p. 106.

may not be able to breathe and is at the point of asphyxiation. Henry, who devotedly tended John during the final three days and nights,<sup>57</sup> would have been especially aware of his anguish. He would not only have seen, but would have directly felt, the wrenching spasms of his brother's body, for when John died, he was in Henry's arms.<sup>58</sup> His brother's suffering deeply affected him: in the poem "Brother Where Dost Thou Dwell," which he sent to his sister Sophia in May of the following year, one stanza reads,

Is thy brow clear again  
As in thy youthful years?  
And was that ugly pain  
The summit of thy fears?<sup>59</sup>

John's death overwhelmed Henry. Although he at first tried not to give in to his grief, and even attempted to be cheerful,<sup>60</sup> he could not maintain the facade. Edward Emerson states, "The shock, the loss, and the sight of his brother's terrible suffering at the end, for a time overthrew Henry so utterly that a friend told me he sat still in the house, could do nothing, and his sisters led him out passive to try to help him."<sup>61</sup> Suddenly, on January 22, Thoreau became very ill--with what seemed to be lockjaw. Although

<sup>57</sup> Davenport and Koopman, "Henry D. Thoreau 1839-1840," in Harding, Days, p. 134.

<sup>58</sup> Harding, Days, p. 134.

<sup>59</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> Letter of Lidian Emerson, in Myerson, p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 26.

he had sustained no cut, he showed all the appropriate symptoms of this same disease that had claimed John eleven days earlier.<sup>62</sup> Emerson himself feared for his friend's life.<sup>63</sup> After two days, however, the symptoms began to wane. The illness had obviously been psychosomatic, for, in addition to his not having suffered any wound, tetanus is almost always fatal. Thoreau himself wrote in a letter to an acquaintance that his disorder had resulted from "close attention to, and sympathy with" John.<sup>64</sup>

Lebeaux has argued that it was guilt about his rivalry with John, and his having survived him, that caused Henry to actually desire death.<sup>65</sup> A better explanation, perhaps, is that Henry had identified so completely with his brother throughout their lives that, when John died, he could not help sympathizing totally. Knowing that an exhibition of his sympathy, if manifested while John was dying, would have caused his brother extra distress, he did not succumb until the stoicism required at the death and funeral was no longer necessary. In other words, Thoreau's "lockjaw" was caused not by guilt, but by love. If he had any death wish, it would have been the expression of his desire to continue being with his brother.

<sup>62</sup> Harding, Days, p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), III, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 66.

<sup>65</sup> Lebeaux, p. 175.

Although his illness had been psychosomatic, Henry's recovery was slow, and for more than a month he was bedridden. One reason he took so long to recuperate was that on January 27--only two weeks after John's death--Emerson's oldest child, five year old Waldo, had suddenly died of scarlet fever. Thoreau had been very close to the boy; thus, his grief was compounded. Hence, even by the middle of April he was still too ill to garden.<sup>66</sup>

Like other mourners, Henry eventually resumed his usual activities. Nonetheless, John's death had long-lasting effects on him. More melancholy than formerly, for a long time he could not be persuaded to do any singing--something he had formerly enjoyed.<sup>67</sup> And once he did resume, his favourite songs were laments. In addition, for several years he dreamed "tragic dreams" on the anniversary of his brother's death.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, Robert Francis notes that it<sup>t</sup> was in the first summer after John's death that Thoreau sold--to Nathaniel Hawthorne, then a newcomer to Concord--the boat that he and John had built and which they had later sailed in on their Concord and Merrimack vacation.<sup>69</sup> The date of the transaction was August 31--the anniversary of the brothers' departure on their river voyage in 1839. Just as in 1841, when Henry

<sup>66</sup> Harding, Days, p. 136.

<sup>67</sup> Harding, Days, p. 136.

<sup>68</sup> Harding, Days, p. 136.

<sup>69</sup> Francis, p. 52.

gave up his school because he did not want to continue teaching without John, he had no desire to keep the boat, for he could no longer share it with his brother.

There are other evidences of how greatly Thoreau felt John's loss. On the first anniversary of his brother's funeral, Henry, painfully aware of mortality, made the following doleful journal entry: "What am I at present? A diseased bundle of nerves standing between time and eternity like a withered leaf that still hangs shivering on its stem."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, even more than a decade after John's death he could still be moved to tears by the mention of him. Daniel Ricketson, who did not meet Thoreau until 1855, attests to this in the following reminiscence:

I never knew him to betray any tender emotion except on one occasion, when he was narrating to me the death of his only brother, John Thoreau, from lockjaw, strong symptoms of which, from his sympathy with the sufferer, he himself experienced. At this time his voice was choked, and he shed tears, and went to the door for air. The subject was of course dropped, and never recurred to again.<sup>71</sup>

The effect, then, of John's death on Henry was lifelong, and since it manifested itself in his behaviour and in his journal, it is not surprising that his public writings also show its influence.

<sup>70</sup> Blanding, "Passages," p. 6, n. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, ed. Anna and Walton Ricketson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), pp. 11-19; rpt. "A Slight, Quaint-Looking Person," in Henry David Thoreau: A Profile, ed. Walter Harding (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p. 25.

In retrospect, the most striking impression given by the events of John's death is the religiosity he displayed. When he learned that he would shortly die, he echoed the words Jesus used in his own acceptance of immanent death.<sup>72</sup> And he was sure that, just as God's goodness characterized this life, it would also belong to the next. Neither was this a deathbed conversion. Canby says that John was "deeply religious," and points out that he was a church member.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, the Thoreau brothers' school began each morning with prayers.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, John expressed his religion in his writing. A few weeks before he died he had written the following verses:

Noble! the sympathetic tear!  
 Feeling we would not smother;  
 Knowest thou not that Jesus here,  
 Wept for a fallen brother?  
 Bid thou thy sacred grief to flow;  
 And while to man the tribute's given,  
 Thou shalt communion with the "Father" know,  
 Thy tear's a passport unto Heaven.<sup>75</sup>

John's orthodox faith is also revealed in two other surviving stanzas of his poetry:

I will not lead a feverish life,  
 To pleasure and to folly given,  
 And sink the soul in petty strife  
 The Father calls to Heaven.

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 26.42, John 18.11.

<sup>73</sup> Canby, pp. 28, 115.

<sup>74</sup> Harding, Days, p. 80.

<sup>75</sup> Barzillai Front's funeral sermon for John Thoreau, Jr., MS, George Davenport, Jr., quoted in Myerson, p. 106. n. 5.

Be this the Eden of my soul,--  
 A second Adam's paradise,  
 When I obey Jehovah's call,--  
 Nor shrink with dread that comes of vice.<sup>76</sup>

Although the reference to, and capitalization of, the "Father" and "Heaven" indicated that John was conventionally Christian in his religion, he does depart somewhat from customary thinking in the final stanza quoted, where he hypothesizes a heaven that would be like this world. For John both heaven and earth were "paradise." Henry--it almost goes without saying--eventually held the same view, and he wrote in Walden, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (283).

That is to say, just as John influenced Henry's interest in nature, ornithology, Indians, the flute, writing, and so on, he must also have swayed him in the area of religion. As already quoted above, Lidian Emerson wrote of John's death that, just before he died, "he looked at Henry with 'a transcendent smile full of Heaven' . . . and Henry 'found himself returning it' and this was the last communication that passed between them." Apparently, then, Henry read John's smile as a sign of his faith in heaven--the smile itself perhaps being interpreted as an intimation of the happiness to be found in the next world. Moreover, Henry returned a smile expressing the same faith--a concrete illustration of John's effect on his brother. This final message that passed between them would have created a lasting impression on Thoreau. Thus it is that

<sup>76</sup> Sanborn, Life, pp. 214-15.

many of his later writings, in terms of their cosmic optimism and their message of a benign afterlife, also have the character of "'a transcendent smile full of Heaven.'"

John's death was likely the single most important event in Thoreau's life. The loss almost killed him, and after such immediate responses as the psychosomatic lockjaw and the months of depression, he carried his grief with him for the rest of his life. Despite these indications of the significance of the event, most of Thoreau's biographers have given only a few pages to it. Like Daniel Ricketson, they describe Thoreau's severe reaction and then never recur to the subject again.<sup>77</sup>

Richard Lebeaux, in his Young Man Thoreau (1977), is the first to emphasize the effect of John's death on Henry strongly enough. Yet, although he points out how important "grief work" became to Thoreau,<sup>78</sup> I believe he is wrong in seeing it primarily as Henry's attempt to expiate a guilt which Lebeaux feels resulted from his having been a rival of John's. Rather, I believe that it was concern for his brother's spiritual fate after death, not guilt about their relationship during life--a relationship that,

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Harding, Days, pp. 134-37; Krutch, pp. 39, 210; Canby, pp. 177-79; Sanborn, Life, pp. 213-15; and Henry S. Salt, Life of Henry David Thoreau (1890; rpt. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1968), pp. 48-49.

<sup>78</sup> Lebeaux, p. 181. "Grief work," notes Lebeaux, is a psychological term that refers to the mental processes by which the mourner struggles to adjust to his loss. The sixth chapter of Lebeaux's book (pp. 167-204) deals exclusively with John's death.

as I have shown above, had actually been idyllic--that motivated Thoreau's long-lasting search for solace. Also, although Lebeaux is very thorough in his descriptions and interpretations of Henry's psychological reactions to the death, his study, because its main purpose is to investigate the man, only indirectly gives insight into his work. That is, though he uses Thoreau's writings to support his explanations of the man's mind, the book is not intended as literary criticism.

Thus, although little has been written about the effect of John's death on Henry, even less attention has been paid to its effect on his writing. For instance, although all critics of A Week must realize that it is intended as a memorial to John, for the first epigraph to the book reveals this, none of them has interpreted its structure or themes on the basis of that essential knowledge. In the same way that the nature of A Week is not fully recognized--due to the critics' failing to make the connection between it and Thoreau's anxiety about his brother's death--so have his other works, as well as his life, not been seen from this very important perspective. Thoreau's experiences and writings in the months following John's death reveal the motivations behind the quest for immortality that is evident in his later life and works.

## II

The shock of losing, within a month, both his brother and his young friend Waldo, profoundly shook Thoreau, especially since up

to this time, as Perry Miller notes, "death had not come close" to him.<sup>79</sup> Because Henry was living in the Emersons' home in the period both before and after the deaths (he was there from April of 1841 to May of 1843),<sup>80</sup> the reactions of Emerson and his wife Lidian established the atmosphere for his own grief-responses.

Waldo's death had been sudden and unexpected: as with John Thoreau, the first signs of illness had appeared only three days before the end. Although Emerson loved all his children, Waldo, who was his first-born, had been special to him. He once said of him that he was "a piece of love and sunshine" worth watching from morning until night.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, when he led a friend into the room where Waldo lay dead, the only response he could make to the person's sympathetic remarks was "Oh, that boy! that boy!"<sup>82</sup> In the days after the death, Emerson was moved to write down some memories of the lad. One journal entry reads, "I have seen the poor boy when he came to a tuft of violets in the wood, kneel down on the ground, smell of them, kiss them, ~~and~~ depart without plucking them."<sup>83</sup> Another entry relates how Waldo once proclaimed

<sup>79</sup> Miller, Consciousness, p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 127, 147.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selections, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 124; cited in W. G. L. McLennan, "Transcendentalism, 1832-1862," Diss. University of Toronto 1973, p. 89.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Emerson, Emerson, p. 167.

<sup>83</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. William H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons, VIII (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1970), p. 166.

that his music "makes the thunder dance," for it had thundered when he was blowing his whistle.<sup>84</sup> Little Waldo was proof of the Transcendentalists' faith in the divinity of man.

Not only Emerson, but all of those who had come in touch with Waldo were delighted with him and had the highest hopes for him. Henry Thoreau, during the time that he had been living with the Emersons, had played and talked with Waldo almost every day.<sup>85</sup> Emerson himself noted in his journal how Thoreau had charmed Waldo by making and mending toys, whistles, boats, popguns and other things for him, and had won Waldo's love and respect.<sup>86</sup> Thus, Henry and Waldo were almost like father and son. Consequently, when the boy died, Thoreau, as noted by Harding, "was as deeply stricken as the Emersons."<sup>87</sup> The intermingling of the grief of Thoreau and the Emersons is well symbolized by the portrait of Waldo which the Emerson family possessed. It had been John Thoreau who, only a few months earlier, had conceived and carried out the idea of having the photograph taken.<sup>88</sup> Bound to them by grief, Thoreau continued living with the Emersons for more than a year after the deaths. Despite, or perhaps because of, their close interaction during this period, Henry, Emerson, and Emerson's wife

<sup>84</sup> Emerson, Journals, VIII, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 27.

<sup>86</sup> Emerson, Journals, VIII, 165.

<sup>87</sup> Harding, Days, p. 136.

<sup>88</sup> Edward Emerson, Emerson, p. 129.

Lidian, each worked out his or her grief in a different way.

Lidian, to whom Thoreau was as close as he would ever be to any woman, turned increasingly to orthodox religion for comfort.<sup>89</sup> Sure in her faith, she often attempted to engage her husband in debate and show him the error of his Transcendental ways.<sup>90</sup> She must have also tried to convert Henry, for, in a letter to Emerson, he writes affectionately that Lidian "almost persuades me to be a Christian, but I fear I as often lapse into heathenism."<sup>91</sup> Although unsuccessful with Henry or her husband, she and her children said prayers at home and attended church.<sup>92</sup> In this way she eased the pain of losing Waldo.

In contrast, Emerson had no answer to his grief but to try to forget. In a journal entry written more than two months after Waldo's death, he confesses, "I comprehend nothing of this fact but its bitterness. Explanation I have none, consolation none that rises out of the fact itself; only diversion; only oblivion of this & pursuit of new objects."<sup>93</sup> Thus he tries to say good-bye to his memories of Waldo. "Farewell" is the word that he uses again and again in the letters he wrote in the days after the

<sup>89</sup> Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), p. 294.

<sup>90</sup> Rusk, p. 435.

<sup>91</sup> Correspondence, Thoreau, p. 77.

<sup>92</sup> Rusk, pp. 225-26.

<sup>93</sup> Emerson, Journals, VIII, 205.

boy's death.<sup>94</sup> And, in a letter to Margaret Fuller, he also questioned whether, after such a loss, he would ever dare to love anything again.<sup>95</sup> Because he had no answer to death, he had no faith in life and love, and therefore grew emotionally colder. As he did after the death of his first bride, he turned increasingly to the world of ideas, for there, at least, he could not be hurt.

The poem "Threnody" (1847), which is Emerson's fullest literary expression of his grief for Waldo,<sup>96</sup> is also dominated by this note of resignation. As the title indicates, this ode is not an elegy, for although it is pastoral it lacks the usual movement from lamentation to consolation. Instead, the entire poem, although it does include many beautiful descriptions of Waldo, has a tone of despair. The first stanza is especially revealing of the cause of Emerson's distress, for here the author of Nature realizes that nature cannot undo death:

The South-wind brings  
Life, sunshine and desire,  
And on every mount and meadow  
Breathes aromatic fire;  
But over the dead he has no power,  
The lost, the lost, he cannot restore;  
And, looking over the hills, I mourn  
The darling who shall not return . . . .<sup>97</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Emerson, Letters, III, 6-8.

<sup>95</sup> Emerson, Letters, III, 8.

<sup>96</sup> His lecture "Immortality," which he first gave in 1861, is more a piece of philosophy than it is grief work; it is not as personal an expression as is "Threnody."

<sup>97</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Poems (1904; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 148.

For Emerson, Waldo was gone forever. By contrast, Lidian's Christian consolation was, of course, the belief that, though lost to this world, he himself would be in heaven. For her husband, though, Waldo would be lost even in the realm of immortality, for it was his belief that the individual soul is dissolved into an all-pervading "Supreme Mind" or "Over-Soul." Hence his assertion toward the end of the poem that death "Pours finite into infinite."<sup>98</sup> There is no consolation in this view, for the person cannot be considered to exist if his individuality disappears. The final couplet of the poem--"House and tenant go to ground, / Lost in God, in Godhead found."--also would not have provided Emerson with any real solace, for the word "Godhead" gives no definite information. Emerson's philosophy had been put to the test by the death of Waldo and it had failed: nature cannot restore the dead, and the "Godhead" does not preserve individual souls. This form of Transcendentalism could offer consolation neither to himself nor to others when faced with the problem of death.

Each Transcendentalist, however, had his own views of the afterlife, for the philosophy's stress on self-reliance in spiritual matters encouraged each to make up his own mind on the relations between Man, Nature, and God--the three entities that comprised the Transcendental trinity. Thus, Thoreau records that his friend Bronson Alcott, who was well known for his loquaciousness, one day defined heaven as "'A place where you can have a little conversa-

<sup>98</sup> Emerson, Poems, p. 156.

tion'" (J XIII, 94), and Thoreau himself came to see the three components of the Transcendental triangle in a way that guaranteed personal immortality. This is revealed in his first book. Therefore, although both A Week and "Threnody" were written as attempts to give what J. J. Boies calls "a transcendental answer to the tragedy of a life cut short,"<sup>99</sup> Thoreau offers a distinctively different answer than does Emerson.

In addition to his own personal need to come to terms with the death of his brother, two other notable factors likely helped bring about Thoreau's search for a philosophy of the afterlife that would be both personally satisfying and compatible with Transcendentalism. These two factors were Rev. Barzillai Frost's funeral eulogy for John, and a June, 1842, letter from a correspondent of his named Isaiah T. Williams. Both Frost and Williams questioned whether the Transcendental philosophy was as valuable as Christianity in regard to the question of death.

John's funeral had taken place in the First Parish Church, which was where Thoreau's own funeral would be held twenty years later. Frost had begun the eulogy with an account of John's love of nature, noting particularly the long walks John used to take, his familiarity with particular hills and trees, and his delight in birds and flowers. He then turned to John's love of children and his general philanthropy, all of which would have been ex-

<sup>99</sup> J. J. Boies, "Circular Imagery in Thoreau's Week," College English, 26 (February 1965), 352.

pected, for John had been a favourite of the town--Edward Emerson describes him as having been "of pleasant face, gay, bright, sympathetic," and remembered by his students as "loving."<sup>100</sup> But although Frost had drawn an idyllic picture of John when he spoke of him in general terms, he expressed misgivings concerning his religion. Embarking on the central part of every eulogy--the minister's intimations of whether or not he considers the deceased person to have been a member of the elect--Frost began, "Of his religious opinions I must speak with less confidence." Henry must have been conscious of nothing else as the minister went on:

He has been affected no doubt by the revolutionary opinions abroad in society in regard to inspiration and religious instructions, as it is very natural the young should. But there has been a tendency of late in his mind, I have thought, to those views which have fortified the minds of the great majority of the wise and good in all ages. (I may be mistaken in supposing that he adopted the transcendental views to any considerable extent.) But, however his theories about religion were unsettled, his principles and religious feeling were always unshaken. The religious sentiment had been awakened, and he manifested it in his tastes, feelings and conversation.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, Frost's reservations about John's faith were due to the young man's having embraced Transcendentalism, which he contrasts with orthodox Christianity. That is, his message was that the two were mutually exclusive; for example, he implies that he hopes

<sup>100</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, pp. 21, 127.

<sup>101</sup> Barzillai Frost's funeral sermon for John Thoreau, Jr., MS, George Davenport, Jr., in Harding, Days, p. 135.

John did not adopt the new views "to any considerable extent." Finally, as if to make amends for his suspecting John's beliefs, Frost concedes that he had at least been religious in "sentiment," but this weak testimony could not dispel the questions he had raised.

Frost's funeral sermon, even if not consciously intended to be a challenge to Henry, must have been interpreted as such by him, for he was, as he himself once wrote, John's "transcendental brother."<sup>102</sup> Thoreau must have felt personally attacked by the minister's implied accusation that those who influenced John to accept Transcendentalism had jeopardized his chance of being saved. However, his reaction was not to give up his revolutionary philosophy, but to defend it from the charge that it was a barrier to salvation. This he did by showing in his writings that Transcendentalism was itself a means to eternal life.

In addition to the challenge from Frost, Thoreau was confronted by the question of Transcendentalism's position on death by the letter from Isaiah Williams, the young law student who was corresponding frequently with him in 1841-42. Williams had come to know Henry and John in 1840, when he came to Concord to teach school. He had become interested in the ideas of Emerson and his circle sufficiently enough so that, when he moved to Buffalo the next year, he still wanted to keep in touch. In his letters to Thoreau he rather simple-mindedly asks for help in deciding whether

<sup>102</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 39.

he should become a lawyer who attends Sabbath School and joins in the reforms of the day, or should rather wholeheartedly embrace "literature--philosophy theology or poetry."<sup>103</sup> Thoreau bluntly answered that he considered the professions "traps which the Devil sets to catch men in--and good luck he has too, if one may judge."<sup>104</sup> Although somewhat inane, Williams' awareness of the differences between Sabbath School Christianity and Transcendentalism resulted in his writing at least one challenging letter to Thoreau.

Thoreau had written to Williams in March of 1842 and had informed him of John's death, his own sympathetic lockjaw, and the death of Waldo Emerson.<sup>105</sup> In his response, on June 23, Williams brought up some basic questions in regard to the deaths. The central paragraph of the letter reads,

Your letter of March 14 gave me much pleasure though I need not say that I sympathize with you most deeply in the loss you sustain by the death of your brother-- I knew him but little--yet I thought I had never met with a more flowing generous spirit--It was not fitted for a cold & hard hearted world like this--in such a nature do I see a strong assurance of a better existence when this is over. . . . And Mr. Emerson--how did he endure the loss of his child? It was a cruel stroke--did his philosophy come to his aid as does the Christian Faith to administer consolation to the bereaved? I wish to know what were his feelings. ~~for~~ [sic] the consolations that a christian faith offers the bereaved & afflicted is one of its strongest holds upon my credulity. If there is consolation from his philosophy in trials like those--it will do much toward settling my belief-- I wish to know minutely on this point. I think much on Death & sometimes doubt my early impressions upon

<sup>103</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, pp. 59, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 68.

<sup>105</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 66.

that subject are ever effaced--The fear of it occasions a thousand folies [sic]--I feel it is unmanly--but yet "that undiscovered country" Who shall tell us whether to fear--or desire it?<sup>106</sup>

Williams, when he wrote this letter, was obviously still trying to decide whether to espouse Transcendentalism. The death of Waldo gave him an opportunity to learn how the leader of the Transcendentalists himself responded when the philosophy was confronted with the evil of death--not as an idea in an essay, but in the body of a favourite child. Thus, Williams makes only a few perfunctory remarks about John's death and quickly focuses on Emerson--asking whether his philosophy could offer the type of consolation that the "Christian Faith" does. That consolation is, of course, the belief that an afterlife exists. This belief, says Williams, attracts him to Christianity, and if Transcendentalism could offer similar solace, he suggests that he then might embrace it. "That undiscovered country," concludes Williams, "who shall tell us whether to fear--or desire it?"

The cause of the uneasiness that Williams expresses in regard to Transcendentalism is described well by Perry Miller, who observes that Emerson's call to self-reliance asked men to give up all external help--including divine support and the promise of immortality. Instead, they were to stand completely alone in the universe. Such an absolute break with those things that give meaning and hope to many people's lives was of course terrifying to some. Miller writes

<sup>106</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 70.

of Emerson,

He seemed to ask scholars to become madmen, to dispense with the historic consolations of Christianity. For many, his optimistic rhetoric only half concealed the bleached skull. Could the impersonal Over-Soul compensate for a loss of the hope of--the very concern for--personal survival?<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, although Emerson is as inconsistent on the topic of immortality as on other subjects, and therefore no one quotation can represent his position, he did write that in the afterlife "everything connected with our personality fails."<sup>108</sup> He thought that man attains immortality only inasmuch as he participates in "the moral and intellectual reality."<sup>109</sup> In other words, Emerson taught that it is not the individual man, but the general intellect of men, that continues after death. He associated the doctrine of "personal immortality" with what is "weak" and "sentimental," and considered the resurrection of the body to be an idea held by "barbarians."<sup>110</sup> In Nature Emerson had made it clear that matter was not as important to him as the ideas behind it; thus, it was his idealism that made him consider the concept of a physical resurrection barbarian, for he did not value the body.

<sup>107</sup> Miller, Consciousness, p. 55.

<sup>108</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Immortality," in Letters and Social Aims (1904; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), pp. 342-43.

<sup>109</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," p. 343.

<sup>110</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," pp. 348, 326.

Thoreau never answered Williams' letter. Perhaps he was upset by Williams' willingness to have others decide for him about questions that each person must answer for himself. On the other hand, perhaps he did not reply because he had not yet found the answer himself in regard to the Transcendental view of the "undiscovered country." Whether Thoreau ever made known to Emerson Williams' inquiry about whether his philosophy had "come to his aid," it is apparent that not only would he have had no reassuring answers, but he would also have resented being asked such a question, for in his essay "Immortality," in which he contends that immortality cannot be proven by rational argument or social debate, he parodies "primary--school questions" that are much like Williams': "O my bishop, O my pastor, is there any resurrection? What do you think? Did Dr. Channing believe that we should know each other? did Wesley? did Butler? did Fénelon?"; and he storms, "What questions are these!". He then advises those who want answers to read Plato, Augustine, Milton, Shakespeare, and other authors who put intuition above reason.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, whatever Emerson would have thought of Williams' letter, at least Thoreau had been confronted with the same question about Transcendentalism that he had been trying to answer for himself ever since John's death, and especially since Frost's funeral sermon for John.

It is apparent, then, that Thoreau could expect no help from Emerson on the question of death, for the "sage of Concord" was

<sup>111</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," pp. 346-47.

himself unsure about it. While still a minister in Boston he was once summoned to the deathbed of a Revolutionary general and was expected, of course, to say those things concerning death and the hereafter that would reassure the dying person. But Emerson so fumbled about, even chatting about glass-making in his hesitation to confront the real questions of the situation, that the old veteran wrathfully ordered him to go home if he did not know his business.<sup>112</sup> On another occasion he was conducting a funeral, and, unable to find the words to finish a prayer, he walked away.<sup>113</sup> His walking away from the problem anticipates his later statement, "it is not my duty to prove to myself the immortality of the soul."<sup>114</sup> The vague beliefs that Emerson did hold in regard to the afterlife were insufficient even for himself, for, as mentioned above, after Waldo's death he had written, "Explanations I have none, consolation none." Thus, Thoreau had to fill this gap in the Transcendental philosophy himself.

The journal entries and letters that Thoreau wrote in the months immediately following John's death provide insight into both how grief-stricken he was and how he attempted to work out a philosophy of an afterlife. His grief is indicated by his initial silence, for although he had been writing almost daily before the

<sup>112</sup> James Elliot Cabot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887), I, 169. Also McLennan, p. 20.

<sup>113</sup> McLennan, p. 20.

<sup>114</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," p. 345.

death, he wrote nothing in his journal for almost a month, and did not write his first letter until March the second. Just as his sisters could not get him interested in talking, neither could he find any purpose in writing. One critic notes that "something of the silence of the grave passed into Henry."<sup>115</sup> Indeed, when he finally did start writing in his journal again--in mid-February--it was a sort of rebirth, for his conception of the world, that is, of self, God, and nature, had changed. The new emphasis of his writing was on two themes: God and the eternity that is found in nature.

The number of reverential references to God that are found in Thoreau's journal for the first months after John died is surprisingly high for one who inveighed so often against the church. Obviously, Thoreau was opposed only to the conservative forms of orthodox religion--he was not against faith itself. Although unsure of the dogma of "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," he had no doubts about the general idea represented by "God" (A Week, 70). Thoreau's attempt to reconcile himself with God was an attempt to move closer to the spirit of his brother, which Richard Lebeaux has pointed out as being associated in Henry's mind with God.<sup>116</sup> The following journal entry, made on February 20, illustrates this search:

My path hitherto has been like a road through a diversified country, now climbing high mountains, then de-

<sup>115</sup> Francis, p. 50.

<sup>116</sup> Lebeaux, p. 184.

scending into the lowest vales. From the summits I saw the heavens; from the vales I looked up to the heights again. In prosperity I remember God, or memory is one with consciousness; in adversity I remember my own elevations, and only hope to see God again. (J, I, 320)

Written only five weeks after John's death, it is not going too far to say that this passage describes his hope to see John as much as to see God, for if he could convince himself that God might be seen, then it follows that his brother might also be seen again. If he could establish this without the help of any scriptural authority--for it was one of the principles of Transcendentalism that all beliefs had to be based on personal experience or intuition--then he would have peace of mind.

Thus, the author who complained in Walden of "ministers who spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject" (153), made his own views on God known: in the five pages of the Journal that cover the period March 1 to March 13, 1842, God is mentioned seventeen times. The entries for February and April show the same religious concern. Consequently, intermingled with such expressions of grief as "I feel as if years had been crowded into the last month" (J, I, 321), and "Where is my heart gone? They say men cannot part with it and live" (J, I, 350), there are many indications of Thoreau's attempt to assuage his sorrow by seeking solace in a good God. Searching for that type of consolation that finds some compensation, some worthy lesson for example, that might be gained from such apparently evil events as the death of loved ones, he writes on March 1 that "Events come out of God. . . . Hence are

they always acceptable as experience, and we do not see how we could have done without them" (J, I, 323-24). He expresses the same idea--that John's death had some beneficial result--in the letter he wrote two weeks later to Isaiah Williams. Having recounted the events of John's and Waldo's deaths, he concludes by writing, "For my own part I feel that I could not have done without this experience."<sup>117</sup> And on April 3 he writes in his journal, "I thank God for sorrow. It is hard to be abused. Is not He kind still, who lets this south wind blow, this warm sun shine on me?" (J, I, 358). Thoreau apparently felt that he had learned that, even taking death into account, God is kind: although the winter had brought the deaths of John and Waldo, the spring brings the warm winds of life. And if God is kind, then there need be no fear for the souls of the dead.

For Thoreau, nothing indicates God's goodness so much as the return of the spring. One critic notes that when Thoreau heard the first sparrow of spring, "he experienced the fulfillment of the Resurrection and creation myths."<sup>118</sup> There are many entries in the journal of the first spring after John's death that show Thoreau developing this idea. On March 13 he writes, "When heaven begins and the dead arise, no trumpet is blown; perhaps the south wind will blow. What if you or I be dead! God is alive still" (J, I, 328), and in April he asserts, "Eternity could not begin with more se-

<sup>117</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 66.

<sup>118</sup> McClellan, p. 52.

curity and momentousness than the spring" (J, I, 359). Thoreau stresses the connection between spring and heaven because he wanted some immediate proof, a revelation he could point to, that there is an afterlife, for he was quite understandably conscious of mortality at this time. He could not bear to think that any soul could itself die. His anxiety is revealed in a journal entry for March 19, in which he writes, "I do not fear that right is not right, that good is not good, but only the annihilation of the present existence. But only that can make me incapable of fear. My fears are as good prophets as my hopes" (J, I, 339). His "hopes" are, of course, that there is happiness after death; his fears are "good prophets" because he believes that death will end all fears, and would therefore necessarily be better than the life he had experienced in the recent months.

Thoreau was impatient to experience the glories of the afterlife. His psychosomatic lockjaw can be interpreted in terms of his desire to both find out about the afterlife and <sup>to</sup> join his brother. Fortunately, he had the sense to recover: he writes in his journal during the time of his convalescence, "Let us not see if we cannot stay here, where God has put us, on his own conditions" (J, I, 334). Still, the urgency with which he wanted to be united with God and be assured of immortality sometimes erupted in extreme proclamations. On March 11 he had written,

My life, my life! why will you linger? Are the years short and the months of no account? How often has long delay quenched my aspirations! Can God afford that I should forget him? Is he so indifferent to my career? Can heaven be

postponed with no more ado? Why were my ears given to hear those everlasting strains which haunt my life, and yet to be prophaned much more by these perpetual dull sounds?

. . . Why, God, did you include me in your great scheme? Will you not make me a partner at last? (J, I, 327)

Although at one level the passage indicates Thoreau's impatience at not receiving the divine inspiration he felt every poet needed in order to be a "seer," the first and the final lines quoted, as well as the context of this part of the journal, suggest his desire to be united with God and experience eternity. In an earlier entry, on the subject of the noble "divinity" of music, he concludes, "What, then, can I do to hasten that other time, or that space where there shall be no time, and these things be a more living part of my life,--where there shall be no discords in my life?" (J, I, 318).

Thoreau's urge to become a part of God and thereby insure himself immortality did not always take so radical a form as a desire for death or an immediate absorption into divinity. One example of a more conventional expression of his hope is found in the journal entry for March 11, in which he states,

I must receive my life as passively as the willow leaf that flutters over the brook. I must not be for myself, but God's work, and that is always good. . . I feel as if [I] could at any time resign my life and the responsibility of living into God's hands, and become as innocent, free from care, as a plant or stone. (J, I, 326-27)

Here, Thoreau indicates that he wishes to subject himself to God's will as totally as do the things of nature, which have no free will, but follow eternal laws. Thus, realizing that nature is an

aspect of God, and is itself eternal, he tries to sympathetically unite with it as well, by asserting his identity with it. In other words, he takes out two eternal-life insurance policies--he gives himself to an immortal and transcendent God, and he joins himself with an eternal and immanent nature. In a way, these two paths are one, for God and nature were often considered by the Transcendentalists as one entity--nature standing as the representation of God. Accordingly, in a letter to Mrs. Lucy Jackson Brown, which, incidentally, was the first letter written after John's death, he calls nature "this face of God."<sup>119</sup> Toward the end of his life this idea became clearer to him and he wrote to another correspondent, "Blessed are they who never read a newspaper, for they shall see Nature, and through her, God."<sup>120</sup>

Thoreau's argument that God is best seen through nature is easy enough to maintain when the setting is a brook, pond, or mountaintop. Difficulties arise, however, when the person who asserts that nature is the visage of God is confronted with facts of death and decay. The problem Thoreau had to work out was this: if nature is God, and God is good, then death, which is a part of nature, must also be good. There are several entries in the journal for the winter of 1842 which show him attempting to convince himself that death is not evil. One entry reveals him trying to come

<sup>119</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 62.

<sup>120</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 611.

to terms with the rotting of trees:

Nature has her russet hues as well as green. Indeed, our eye splits on every object, and we can as well take one path as the other. If I consider its history, it is old; if its destiny, it is new. . . . I will not be imposed on and think Nature is old because the season is advanced. I will study the botany of the mosses and fungi on the decayed [wood], and remember that decayed wood is not old, but has just begun to be what it is. (J, I, 338)

In other words, whether death is good or bad is a matter of perspective. Accordingly, in another journal entry of this period Thoreau asserts that even things of death and dissolution "are alive and beautiful" when seen with "the eye of ~~a~~<sup>a</sup> poet" or "as God sees them" (J, I, 328). The poet sees in the decaying wood not mortification, but proof of eternal progression. There is only a change of form; no loss of life.

The theme of the eternalness of nature, which Thoreau developed to alleviate his grief, does not appear in his journal and letters until March, by which time the snow would be melting and spring visibly on its way. As already mentioned, to Thoreau the coming of spring was a natural symbol of the soul's rebirth into eternity. In direct opposition to Emerson, who in the first stanza of "Threnody" states that the "South-wind . . . has no power" to restore the dead, Thoreau thought that "the south wind will blow" when the dead arise.

In addition to the private assertions in the journal, Thoreau publicly avowed his faith in nature's symbolic communication that there is life after death. His attempt to find comfort in the

idea of a natural rebirth is central in the letter to Lucy Brown. Dated March 2, it contains many expressions of his faith in nature's ability to right all wrong. For instance, on the subject of whether or not he should grieve John's death, he writes, "Soon the ice will melt, and the blackbirds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in this face of God, and we will not be sorrowful, if he is not."<sup>121</sup> The "everlasting" quality of nature is a reassurance to Thoreau that nature, and therefore God--since nature is a "face" of God--is good; moreover, it follows that because man is both a part of nature and of God, he too must be everlasting. Thus, further in the letter, he writes, "I do not wish to see John ever again--I mean him who is dead--but that other whom only he would have wished to see, or to be, of whom he was the imperfect representative."<sup>122</sup> In other words, Thoreau distinguishes between his brother as he was before death and his brother as the ideal and spiritual being that he has become. His only hope, he had written in his journal ten days earlier, was "to see God again"; in this letter it is explicit that John is the actual object of that wish.

In the same letter to Mrs. Brown that contains this expression of his attitude to John's death, Thoreau also deals with the death of Waldo. He uses analogies that are based on the assumption that

<sup>121</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 62.

<sup>122</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 62.

the cycles of nature give knowledge about the death of man:

As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn? He had not even taken root here. I was not startled to hear that he was dead;--it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organization demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived. Neither will nature manifest any sorrow at his death, but soon the note of the lark will be heard down in the meadow, and fresh dandelions will spring from the old stocks where he plucked them last summer.<sup>123</sup>

The pattern Thoreau uses here is the same as he uses in the section on John, where he mentions that the ice will presently transform itself into a living river again. That is, he skilfully identifies the dead person with a nature that he shows moving from the death of autumn and winter to the life of spring and summer, and he focuses on the singing birds and new flowers to indicate the optimistic view of death which he has made his own. Almost two months after the deaths, he consistently uses the rebirth that characterizes nature in order to come to terms with mortality. He suggests that the cycles of nature prove man's immortality. His new understanding of the correspondence between man and nature is summarized in his journal entry of March 8:

I live in the perpetual verdure of the globe. I die in the annual decay of nature.

We can understand the phenomenon of death in the animal better if we first consider it in the order next below us, the vegetable. (J, I, ■)  
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<sup>123</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 63.

Three days after this entry was made, Thoreau again, in a letter to Emerson, uses analogies from nature. Attempting to console Emerson for his own loss, he points out that people are not saddened when they look over the fields in the autumn and see flowers and grasses withering, "for the law of their death is the law of new life. . . . The herbage cheerfully consents to bloom, and wither, and give place to a new."<sup>124</sup> Death, then, is a necessary stage in the metamorphosis to a new life. For the reasons that death in nature is so universal, is accepted without lament, and results in rebirth, Thoreau concludes that a wise person will not grieve for the death of any individual, but will "snuff a fragrance in the gales of autumn, and congratulate Nature upon her health."<sup>125</sup>

The smell of the mouldering plants in autumn, because good, is itself a sign that death is a part of Nature's health. In addition, of course, the fragrances anticipate the sweet aromas of spring. In his journal entry for March 12, Thoreau states what nature has taught him about death: "To die is not to begin to die and continue; it is not a state of continuance, but of transientness. . . . There is no continuance of death. It is a transient phenomenon. Nature presents nothing in a state of death" (J, I, 327-28). Death, then, is a transit, a carrying across, from one form or place to another.

The repetition in the above passage of the one idea of the impermanent quality of death indicates how desperately Thoreau was

<sup>124</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, pp. 64-65..

<sup>125</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 65.

trying to convince himself of its truth. The origins of the reservations that must have motivated his endeavoring to so forcibly persuade himself that he had no misgivings concerning his faith in man's own rebirth are suggested by Joel Porte. He also sees Thoreau's concern with the cycle of nature as part of his attempt to "convince himself that by associating with the perennial return of life, he could triumph over death." But he further notes that although Thoreau learned that nature is reborn, he would also have seen the opposite lesson--that it dies each year.<sup>126</sup> Thus, the lesson that the revolution of the seasons teaches is not clear; the metaphor fails because, although it indicates a general rebirth of the species, it shows there is inevitable death of the individual. Thoreau would consequently never get unequivocal proof of immortality from the seasons, for each winter would undo the lesson learned the previous spring.

Whether or not Thoreau was totally convinced that man's immortality was proven by the annual rebirth in nature--and it is likely that he was not, since he also pursued a more conventional faith in God as a means to insure his own immortality--it is apparent, in his letters and journal entries of the early part of 1842, that he habitually used writing as a tool both to express his grief and to work out a philosophy that might assuage it. Hence, the theme of mortality in contest with immortality is

<sup>126</sup> Joel Porte, Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), p. 200.

central in A Week and Walden, for the first drafts of both were composed only a few years after his initial personal encounters with death. Even after those books were written, his attempts to transmute, from destructive to constructive forms, the tension produced by the loss of those close to him, provided him with creative energy for the rest of his life.

As mentioned above, Thoreau's anxiety about death and his consequent hope that there is an afterlife was not peculiar to the early part of 1842. For example, one of Thoreau's strongest literary responses to his grief is found in a poem he sent to his sister Helen in May of 1843. Entitled "Brother where dost thou dwell?", Carl Bode calls it "Perhaps the most moving poem ever written by Thoreau."<sup>127</sup> The first six of the ten stanzas are as follows:

Brother where dost thou dwell?  
 What sun shines for thee now?  
 Dost thou indeed farewell?  
 As we wished here below.

What season didst thou find?  
 'Twas winter here.  
 Are not the fates more kind  
 Than they appear?

Is thy brow clear again  
 As in thy youthful years?  
 And was that ugly pain  
 The summit of thy fears?

Yet thou wast cheery still,  
 They could not quench thy fire,  
 Thou didst't abide their will,  
 And then retire.

<sup>127</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 364.

Where chiefly shall I look  
 To feel thy presence near?  
 Along the neighboring brook  
 May I thy voice still hear?

Dost thou still haunt the brink  
 Of yonder river's tide?  
 And may I ever think  
 That thou art at my side?<sup>128</sup>

In addition to revealing Thoreau's preoccupation with the fate of his brother's soul, this elegy reveals much about the conception of the afterlife that he had been formulating in the past months. Namely, it is a place much like earth, for it has a sun and seasons. In some lines included in another version of the same poem, he writes, "Is nature there as fair? / And are there friends as kind?"<sup>129</sup> Thus, in this poem, as in the letters of 1842, Thoreau goes to nature to look for John's "presence" or spirit. In the above stanzas he searches by the brook and river; in the other version he also includes mention of a pond, probably Walden:

When on the pond I whirl  
 In sport, if sport may be,  
 Now thou art gone,  
 May I still follow thee?<sup>130</sup>

Sherman Paul has noted that these lines indicate that "Thoreau's most famous natural settings, the river and the pond, were asso-

<sup>128</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 151

<sup>129</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 316.

<sup>130</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 316.

ciated with him [John]."<sup>131</sup> In other words, John's influence will be present in most of Thoreau's writings, for most of them are set in the localities he shared with his brother. His question "Now thou art gone, / May I still follow thee?" is answered in A Week for instance, for in that book he both retraces their trip on the rivers--thereby following John's example as a lover of nature--and also proves for himself that there is an afterlife--thereby making way for his following John on the spiritual level as well.

As already noted, Thoreau had had no closely felt experiences with death before 1842, when John and Waldo had died. Once such experience came however, it did not let up, for to add to the losses he had already suffered, by July of the next year Thoreau learned that his best friend, Charles Stearns Wheeler, had died in Germany, where he had gone to study in the universities. Although Harding states that "Thoreau thought that Wheelers's death had left a gap that could not be filled,"<sup>132</sup> little has been made of the effect that this death, too, would have had on him.

Thoreau and Wheeler first became acquainted in the Concord Academy, where they were classmates. They were the only freshmen offered by the Academy for admission into Harvard in 1833, and, when both <sup>were</sup> accepted, they went the fifteen miles to Cambridge to-

<sup>131</sup> Sherman Paul, The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 105.

<sup>132</sup> Harding, Days, p. 154.

gether and were roommates for the year.<sup>133</sup> In addition to being roommates they were closest friends: that October, both somewhat homesick, they walked home together from Cambridge for a visit. (Henry's brother reports in a letter that Henry's feet had become so blistered that he walked two miles in his stockings, and took three hours to hike the three miles from Lincoln, where Stearns lived, to Concord.)<sup>134</sup>

Still friends with Wheeler in their graduation year, Thoreau spent the six-week summer vacation of 1837 in a hut Stearns had built on Flint's Pond (also called "Sandy Pond" and "Lincoln Pond"), which is about one mile east of Walden Pond. Thoreau, who had been ill, had time to read, loaf, and sleep, and the two ate good meals at the Wheeler family house, which was not far from the hut.<sup>135</sup> It had been an idyllic holiday and it undoubtedly was a model for Thoreau's own Walden Pond experiment. In response to specific questions that F. B. Sanborn had raised about the vacation, Ellery Channing wrote, "As Mr. Thoreau was not too original and inventive to follow the example of others, if good to him, it is very probably this undertaking of Stearns Wheeler, whom he regarded . . . a heroic character, suggested his own experiment at Walden." Further in the letter Channing reiterates that it is

<sup>133</sup> John Olin Eidson, Charles Stearns Wheeler: Friend of Emerson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951), pp. 4-7. Also see Harding, Days, pp. 30-32.

<sup>134</sup> Sanborn, Life, p. 217.

<sup>135</sup> Harding, Days, p. 49.

"highly probable that Mr. Wheeler's experiment suggested Mr. Thoreau's, as he was a man he almost worshiped."<sup>136</sup>

The reason that Thoreau "almost worshiped" Wheeler is suggested in a biographical synopsis of the man provided by John Eidson. He writes that Stearns "read Plato & Swedenborg, argued God in man and man in God . . . preached self-reliance, deplored restraint by any creed, became unitarian, kept a journal, and went to live in a hut in the woods."<sup>137</sup> Indeed, the summary almost describes Thoreau himself. Harding also attests to Wheeler's worth: he notes that, in his time, he was regarded as "one of the most promising of the younger Transcendentalists."<sup>138</sup> Some of the facts of Wheeler's short career in letters make this clear. After graduating, he had stayed on at Harvard, where, among other academic positions and activities, he attended lectures in the Divinity School and took over as Greek Tutor after Jones Very was relieved of the position when he suffered a nervous breakdown. As a classicist, his major work was an annotated edition of Herodotus (Thoreau was reading Herodotus in 1861, during his final illness);<sup>139</sup> as a Transcendentalist, he co-edited, with Emerson, works of Carlyle for publication in America.<sup>140</sup> Thoreau's own appreciation of

<sup>136</sup> Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau, ed. F. B. Sanborn (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1895), pp. 68-69, in Eidson, p. 51.

<sup>137</sup> Eidson, p. xii.

<sup>138</sup> Harding, Days, p. 30.

<sup>139</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 611.

<sup>140</sup> Eidson, pp. 26-32.

Wheeler's literary work is seen in his having, when he was secretary of the Concord Lyceum, obtained Wheeler to lecture.<sup>141</sup> In addition, when Thoreau edited the April 1843 issue of The Dial, he included a letter by Stearns Wheeler.<sup>142</sup>

Although an excellent scholar and teacher, Wheeler was a preacher at heart. His last sentence in the autobiography for the Harvard "Class Book" of 1837 is "I hope one day to be a clergyman," and he was licensed to preach a few months before he left for Europe, where he was going to study philosophy and theology.<sup>143</sup> Wheeler, then, was worthy of Thoreau's high regard because he was very nearly what the Transcendentalists considered a complete man, being at home in the realm of nature, intellect, and spirit.

Thus it was, that, in the fall of 1841, when Thoreau first began considering building a cabin away from society, his first choice was Flint's Pond,<sup>144</sup> where he had spent the one summer vacation with Stearns Wheeler. He must have been quite intent on living at that pond, for when the Flints, who owned the land around it, refused him permission to build, he never forgot it. Years later, in Walden, Thoreau's invective reached a high point when, although he usually inveighed against society only in general terms, he attacked Flint himself: "Flint's Pond!

<sup>141</sup> Harding, Days, p. 72.

<sup>142</sup> Harding, Days, p. 118.

<sup>143</sup> Eidson, p. 55.

<sup>144</sup> Harding, Days, p. 123.

. . . What right had the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? Some skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face . . ." (195)-- and so on for another twenty lines of abuse.

Although prevented from reliving the experience he had shared with Wheeler, Thoreau did stress, in Walden, that Walden Pond is "indirectly related to Flint's Pond, which is more elevated, by a chain of small ponds" and that the periodic rising and falling of the levels of the two ponds concur (194, 181). He thereby acknowledges the original source of inspiration for his going to the woods.

Since Henry and Stearns were such good friends, it is no wonder that Thoreau reacted to his death in the same way that he reacted to John's--that is, by asserting that he was not really dead, for he would still be alive in an afterlife. Writing to his mother, who had in an earlier letter informed him of Wheeler's death, he states, "I trust that Stearns Wheeler is not dead. I should be slow to believe it. He was made to work very well in this world. There need be no tragedy in his death."<sup>145</sup> Similarly, in a letter on the same subject to his sister Helen, he writes,

I think that Stearns Wheeler has left a gap in the community not easy to be filled. . . . I think of him as healthy and brave, and am confident that if he

<sup>145</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 122.

had lived he would have proved useful in more ways than I can describe--He would have been authority on all matters of fact--and a sort of connecting link between men and scholars of different walks and tastes. The literary enterprises he was planning for himself and friends remind one of an older and more studious time--so much then remains for us to do who survive.<sup>146</sup>

Here too, Thoreau, although admitting that Wheeler is physically dead, shows his belief that there is a continuation of the person's existence after death by speaking of Stearns in the present tense-- "I think of him as healthy and brave." Moreover, his view of himself as one of those "who survive" indicates both the feeling of separation and purpose that he had after the loss of those near him. Consequently, he kept John's memory alive by developing the same interests his brother had had--the flute, ornithology, nature, Indians, and so on. Likewise, he sustained Wheeler's memory by becoming that "connecting link" between the various disciplines--between natural science and theology, for instance--that he thought Wheeler would have become, and by living in a hut by a pond in the same way that Wheeler had done.

Thus, when Thoreau finally did go to Walden Pond in 1845, not only was his purpose to write a memorial to his dead brother, but his life style was based on that of his dead friend. Both John and Stearns had died at age twenty-six; when Thoreau went to Walden he was twenty-seven and nearing his birthday--he would have been

<sup>146</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 129

very conscious of his mortality.<sup>147</sup> The works he produced during his years at the pond--a completed version of A Week and the first draft of Walden--would inevitably reflect, in both theme and structure, his awareness of death and his hope that his brother and friend had somehow survived it.

147 Even Thoreau's name would have been a continual reminder of mortality, for he had been named after his paternal uncle David Thoreau, who had died at the young age of twenty-three only six weeks before "David Henry's" christening. Perhaps one of the reasons Thoreau reversed his name when he reached maturity was to free himself from the mortality symbolized by his given name. (Harding, Days, pp. 11, 54, 200, gives further details on Thoreau's name-changing.)

## Chapter Two

"The other world is all my art; my pencils will draw no other; my jack-knife will cut nothing else . . . ."--Thoreau, in Emerson's "Thoreau"

Like Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is no straightforward autobiography. The vacation that it is based on actually lasted two weeks--from August 31 to September 13, 1839. True, a total of seven days was spent on the rivers, but the five days of rowing to New Hampshire and the two days coming back were separated by almost a week of journeying on land. The overland part of the trip, in which the brothers went by stage and by foot to the White Mountains, where they climbed Mt. Washington, is given only a few pages in the "Thursday" chapter. Thus, Thoreau was left with a tighter and better book--there is the symbolic pattern of the quest implied by the river voyage, which describes a venturing out and a return; and there is also the natural structure of the week, a repeating unit of time that is itself made up of seven cyclic days, which Thoreau uses to full effect by giving one chapter to each day. As Sherman Paul has noted, the organization of A Week around natural cycles of time anticipates Thoreau's use of the seasons as a structure in Walden.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul, p. 197.

Although Thoreau had this natural structure of the week--an organic form which grew out of the actual experience--he obscured it somewhat by introducing, throughout the narrative of the voyage, seemingly unconnected essays, poems, translations, and quotations--all of which together account for more than half of the book.<sup>2</sup> In 1849, the year that A Week was published, James Russell Lowell stated the following of it: "The leaves of his portfolio and river-journal seem to have been shuffled together with a trustful dependence on some overruling printer-providence."<sup>3</sup> The controversy about the additions extraneous to the narrative has raged ever since. Thus, besides determining whether the narrative of the voyage has a theme apart from simply relating the vacation, each critic of the book has had to decide whether the discursive material supports, or gets in the way of, the theme.

The trend in early criticism was to see the narrative portion of A Week as a pleasant travelogue with no dominating theme. The essays, translations, and other material not directly related to the voyage were considered to obscure the narrative. Lowell, a part of whose review has already been quoted, wrote of the discursive materials, "We come upon them like snags, jolting us head-foremost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up ~~the~~ stream or drifting down."<sup>4</sup> Although he felt that the digressions are not

<sup>2</sup> Harding, Days, p. 247.

<sup>3</sup> James Russell Lowell, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," Massachusetts Quarterly Review, 3 (December 1849), 40-51; rpt. in Pertaining to Thoreau, ed. S. A. Jones (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 16, col. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Lowell, p. 15, col. 2.

intrinsically bad, his conclusion is "they are out of proportion and out of place, and mar our Merrimacking dreadfully. We were bid to a river-party, not to be preached at."<sup>5</sup>

This opinion of Lowell, the most influential literary critic of nineteenth-century America, prejudiced others' appraisals of the book for a hundred years. Thus, Canby, in his biography Thoreau (1939), also complains about the extra material in A Week, and describes it as being "perilously like a library of the shorter works of Henry Thoreau."<sup>6</sup> While Lowell had at least appreciated the natural observation in the book--"its fresh smell of the woods"--<sup>7</sup> Canby does not even find that, but sees only "a thin thread of narrative tying together a bundle of commentaries."<sup>8</sup> In his opinion, the book was an attempt by Thoreau to publish an anthology of his own disparate writings. He likens what he considers its "overstuffed quality" to that of "a pudding into which the pantry has been dumped."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, he at least recognizes that John's sudden death must have given a special "significance" to the record of the voyage.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lowell, p. 16, col. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Canby, p. 272.

<sup>7</sup> Lowell, p. 16, col. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Canby, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Canby, p. 273.

<sup>10</sup> Canby, p. 241.

With Krutch's assessment of A Week in his Henry David Thoreau (1948), the criticism, although still negative, came full circle. Whereas Lowell had liked the narrative and found the digressions obtrusive, Krutch protests that "the chronological order of the narrative has no relation to the disquisitions which constitute the most important part of the book . . . ." <sup>11</sup> Although he feels that the digressions are actually more important than the story of the voyage itself, he does not suggest that there might be any unifying theme or motif connecting them. Instead, he concludes that "the whole is little more than a notebook." <sup>12</sup>

This suspicion that A Week is a literary blunder has survived to more recent times. Even such a Thoreau enthusiast as Walter Harding questions the presence of the essays, poems, translations, and quotations: echoing Canby's pantry-in-the-pudding analogy, he writes that the extra materials are "dumped in like plums into a pudding." <sup>13</sup> And in his Thoreau Handbook, he approves of an edition which had stripped A Week of its digressions. <sup>14</sup>

Harding's negative appraisal of the book is an anomaly in recent criticism however, for in opposition to the earlier nega-

<sup>11</sup> Krutch, pp. 95-96

<sup>12</sup> Krutch, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Harding, Days, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Harding, Handbook, p. 56. The edition of A Week referred to is The Concord and the Merrimack, ed. Dudley C. Lunt (New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press, 1954).

tive evaluations, the general trend--beginning in the late 1940's--has been to confirm that A Week is not a haphazard patchwork of excerpts, but is a unified work of art.

The current testimony to the book's worth is not without precedent. Emerson had called A Week "a book of extraordinary merit,"<sup>15</sup> and had helped Thoreau in his attempts to find a publisher for it. In a July 1846 letter he had enthusiastically written to a friend,

In a short time, if Wiley & Putnam smile, you shall have Henry Thoreau's "Excursion on Concord & Merrimack rivers," a seven days' voyage in as many chapters, pastoral as Isaak Walton, spicy as flagroot, broad & deep as Menu. He read me some of it under an oak on the river bank the other afternoon, and invigorated me.<sup>16</sup>

When it finally was published three years later, Emerson still held it in high regard and had copies sent to such friends as Alfred Lord Tennyson and Thomas Carlyle.<sup>17</sup>

Thoreau himself also never lost faith in A Week. When he could not find a publisher for it in 1846, he revised the manuscript and in mid-1847 offered a second version for publication.<sup>18</sup> Although again no publisher could be found, Thoreau wrote to an

<sup>15</sup> Emerson, Letters, III, 384.

<sup>16</sup> Emerson, Letters, III, 338.

<sup>17</sup> Harding, Days, p. 252.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Frederick Hovde, "The Writing of Henry D. Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: A Study in Textual Materials and Technique," Diss. Princeton 1956, p. xi.

acquaintance on March 8, 1848, that this had proved fortunate, for the delay allowed him to reevaluate and "mend" the book.<sup>19</sup> Later that year a third version was submitted, and, although Thoreau had to underwrite the cost of publishing it (Emerson had encouraged him to do so, for he was sure the book would sell), A Week finally appeared on May 30, 1849.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, it was not a success--one critic has rightly termed it "a worst-seller."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Thoreau liked the book enough so that even after his publisher had, in October 1853, sent him 706 unsold copies out of the edition of 1,000,<sup>22</sup> he continued making textual changes in it. And when Walden was published the following year he still did not stop revising his first book.<sup>23</sup> In fact, a few weeks before his death he asked Ellery Channing to see that an error in A Week would be corrected.<sup>24</sup>

Both Emerson and Thoreau, then, regarded A Week highly; thus, favourable evaluations of the book have some prestigious support. More recently, in 1948--the same year that Krutch's biography of Thoreau was published--William Drake wrote a Master's thesis in which he sees A Week as a successful use of the metaphor of intellectual exploration. He sees the voyage on the rivers as not

<sup>19</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 245-46.

<sup>21</sup> Paul F. Boller, Jr., American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> Harding, Days, p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 276.

<sup>24</sup> Harding, Days, p. 461.

only the account of a vacation, but as a symbol of the "exploratory journey into thought."<sup>25</sup> Although he feels that Thoreau failed to make the world of thought arise naturally out of the context of the narrative,<sup>26</sup> he at least shows that Thoreau had a purpose in juxtaposing the digressions with the narrative: that is, Thoreau wished to show that, for himself, exploration of the natural world was tied to self-exploration.

Even though Drake's thesis was not published until two sections from it--on A Week and Walden--appeared in a collection of essays, published in 1962, its influence is evident in Sherman Paul's The Shores of America (1958). Paul, who cites Drake, elaborates further than his forerunner on the symbolic meaning of the river journey, which he sees as a quest for inspiration.<sup>27</sup> Giving A Week more extensive treatment than did Drake, he firmly establishes that Thoreau conceived "the vocation of traveling as spiritual exploration."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, he gives a clearer rationale for the inclusion of the digressions: he states that Thoreau "wanted to show how ideas were rooted in places and actions,"<sup>29</sup> and was "trying to find

<sup>25</sup> William Drake, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in "A Formal Study of H. D. Thoreau," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Iowa, 1948); rpt. in Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Drake, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> Paul, p. 197.

<sup>28</sup> Paul, p. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Paul, p. 204.

the balance of outer and inner."<sup>30</sup> He was the first critic to praise A Week without qualification.

Although Sherman Paul had a greater audience, another work of the 1950's, Carl F. Hovde's dissertation on Thoreau's technique in writing A Week, offers more concrete proof that the book is no slipshod job. After having analyzed approximately three thousand pages of textual materials remaining from Thoreau's writing A Week, he states that "the book is not the arbitrary collection of descriptions, penseses, and quotations which it has often been considered, but is . . . a unified work of art which was carefully wrought."<sup>31</sup> He points out that not only did Thoreau write three versions of the book,<sup>32</sup> but that, as the extant manuscript fragments reveal, through revision he omitted approximately forty percent of his original material.<sup>33</sup> The revisions consisted not only of leaving out anecdotes and reflections which would have duplicated other sections of the book,<sup>34</sup> but also of a simplification and condensation of his prose, so as to achieve a more economical style.<sup>35</sup> Like Drake, Hovde also sees the physical voyage as comparable to

<sup>30</sup> Paul, p. 205.

<sup>31</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. xi.

<sup>33</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 189.

<sup>34</sup> Hovde, Diss., pp. 209-10.

<sup>35</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 25.

"the voyage of the mind."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he concludes that the digressive materials are an important part of its structure: he writes that "the meditations and the story of the trip are two themes which weave into one another, each by its separate but complementary character reinforcing the other."<sup>37</sup> The shifts from subject to subject he considers a metaphor of the "fluidity of mind."<sup>38</sup> When Hovde published a version of a section of this thesis as an article in 1958,<sup>39</sup> his voice was added to Paul's in the public assertion that A Week has that unity which makes good art.

Because A Week had been made respectable in the 1950's, there was a flurry of articles on it in the following decade. That the narrative and the digressions were functionally connected had been settled; the new center of attention became the question of the book's theme. Thus, W. B. Stein approaches the book with the belief that it is essentially a paraphrase of Hindu philosophy. It is his hypothesis that A Week "recapitulates an intensive search for the divine center of the universe," and that "the journey climaxes in his liberation from the bondage of time."<sup>40</sup> Although this adequately describes the theme of the book, I believe that Stein is wrong in

<sup>36</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 51

<sup>37</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Carl Frederick Hovde, "Nature into Art: Thoreau's Use of His Journals in A Week," American Literature, 30 (1958), 165-84.

<sup>40</sup> William B. Stein, "Thoreau's First Book: A Spoor of Yoga," Emerson Society Quarterly, 51 (1965), 4, col. 1.

assuming that both the path and the goal were Hindu. Rather, Thoreau's path is a Transcendental one, and his ultimate goal is a Christian type of heaven. Nevertheless, Stein's assertion that the quest in the book is not primarily intellectual (as Drake supposes), or artistic (as Paul supposes), but is spiritual, is a crucial distinction.

This stress on the religious quality of the book is continued by Jonathan Bishop in his article "The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's A Week," which gives a more western, and probably more accurate, version of Stein's theory of the spiritual quest. Bishop sees the book as being about the self's experience with nature, which becomes "at certain moments, an encounter with God."<sup>41</sup> The discovery of a spiritual nature manifests itself to the point of Thoreau's getting, as Bishop says, "glimpses of another world."<sup>42</sup> Paul had interpreted the insights in A Week as part of a general type of "inspiration";<sup>43</sup> Bishop, however, sees them as revelations of a less literary but more sacred type.

Also emphasizing the spiritual essence of A Week, Joyce Holland, in her article on the book, likewise stresses the consistency of this theme throughout it. Although her interpretation is somewhat hidden by a use of terms that are not fully defined--for example,

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Bishop, "The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week," ELH, 33 (March 1966), 70.

<sup>42</sup> Bishop, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> Paul, p. 225.

she states that A Week is about "the transcendental perception of the Unity beyond forms"--<sup>44</sup> her basic assumption that Thoreau is contrasting this world with some other more perfect realm is clear. In addition, she accurately points out that the river is itself a symbol of the "Unity," and that this path that Thoreau shows leading through nature toward an understanding of the spiritual world is a metaphor of the route of Transcendental correspondence.

The spiritual pilgrimage in A Week is further elaborated upon in a second article by Stein on the book as an expression of Thoreau's eastern thought. Stein attempts to convince the reader that the book is a "symbolic account of Thoreau's gradual mastery of yoga."<sup>45</sup> However, like his earlier article, this one is also too heavily freighted with Hindu terms and explications of their meanings; consequently, the philosophy of yoga is described to such an extent that A Week takes second place. Despite this, his interpretation, though making use of Hindu terms, echoes that of Bishop and Holland, for all recognize that Thoreau is interested in uniting with an absolute power. Thus, for example, Stein sees in A Week "Thoreau's assimilation of the Hindu ascetic and meditative techniques that conduce to the union of the soul (Atman) and God (Brahman)."<sup>46</sup> That is, the book concerns the

<sup>44</sup> Joyce M. Holland, "Pattern and Meaning in Thoreau's A Week," Emerson Society Quarterly, 50 (1968), 49, col. 2.

<sup>45</sup> William B. Stein, "Thoreau's A Week and Om Cosmography," American Transcendental Quarterly, 11 (1971), 15.

<sup>46</sup> Stein, "Om," p. 15.

mortal's absorption into immortality.

In conclusion, all of these recent critical interpretations, although different in details, come to the same decision: A Week outlines a religious quest for a more perfect realm or being.

Lawrence Buell, in his Literary Transcendentalism (1973), makes a definite pronouncement in this regard. He states that, with the exception of Theodore Parker's A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion, A Week is "the most ambitious book which the

Transcendental movement produced . . . which attempts a comprehensive theology."<sup>47</sup> In terms of ambition, then, Buell feels that only Parker--a prodigious clergyman--outdid Thoreau in the area of Transcendental theology. In terms of artistic sensitivity however, Buell declares, "A Week is indeed the most manysidedly sensitive public account of the soul's encounter with the Not-me which the Transcendentalist movement produced."<sup>48</sup>

Following these critics, my basic assumption is that the theme of A Week is a search for an ultimate reality. Using that assumption as a starting point, I wish to present two related theories. First, I contend that the impulse that was behind Thoreau's search is as important as the search itself, for a knowledge of what motivated him in A Week should also help in understanding his other works. Thus, I suggest that it was primarily the death

<sup>47</sup> Lawrence Buell, Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 207.

<sup>48</sup> Buell, p. 238.

of John that impelled Thoreau's quest for transcendent reality: his heightened awareness of mortality--which was intensified by the deaths of Waldo Emerson and Stearns Wheeler--made him seek both the immortality within, and the source of immortality without, the self. This psychobiographical approach has not been attempted in the other criticism of A Week, for most critics, in their attempts to establish the book's theme, have based their conclusions more on Thoreau's intellectual interests than on his heartfelt personal concerns. Since Thoreau made the voyage that the book describes together with John, and then intended the book as a memorial to him, it is natural that the same awareness of death and hope for life after death that dominate his letters and journal entries of the first part of 1842 also actuate A Week. In conjunction with this theory that Thoreau's concern with John's death is what motivates the spiritual pilgrimage that is metaphorically described by the account of the river trip, my second hypothesis is that the goal of Thoreau's quest is more particular than the "Sacred," or the "Not-me." His desire is to have knowledge of a specific realm--that which most people call heaven.

## II

The four epigraphs to A Week quickly introduce the reader to the book's main theme--the soul's voyage from mortality to immortality. In the first, Thoreau invokes the spirit of his brother to inspire the book:

Where'er thou sail'st who sailed with me,  
 Though now thou climbest loftier mounts,  
 And fairer rivers dost ascend,  
 Be thou my Muse, my Brother --.

This epigraph shows the same concerns as does Thoreau's elegy for John--his "Brother where dost thou dwell?". That is, it reveals his worry about what became of John's soul after his death, and, in answer to this concern, it shows his hope that the after-life includes the same physical features as this world. In the convention of the elegy, John's name is neither included here nor anywhere else in the book, but just as his name naturally fills the blank after "Brother," and the reader must be familiar with Thoreau's life in order to fill that blank, so can the rest of A Week only be properly understood if the reader remembers that John's death is the inspiration behind it.

The second epigraph, like the first, is also about death, though here it is his own that Thoreau is anticipating:

I am bound, I am bound, for a distant shore.  
 By a lonely isle, by a far Azore,  
 There it is, there it is, the treasure I seek,  
 On the barren sands of a desolate creek.

The juxtaposition of this epigraph with the first suggests the psychological motivation behind Thoreau's search for the "treasure" of immortality: he realized that he was as much bound for the "distant shore" on the other side of death as is any man. That the river voyage the book relates will serve as a metaphor of

the soul's passage to the afterlife is explicit in the first line of this epigraph.

In the third epigraph, which begins "I sailed up a river with a pleasant wind," the metaphor of the spirit's voyage is further clarified, for the last couplet of the stanza reads, "THOU seemest the only permanent shore, / The cape never rounded, nor wandered o'er." That is, the "distant shore" of the second epigraph is God--and where God is, so, feels Henry, is his brother.

A quotation from Ovid's Metamorphoses makes up the final epigraph. The quatrain Thoreau chose describes God's creation of the rivers. As noted by Stein, the rivers, which are seeking the ocean, are themselves on a voyage.<sup>49</sup> Taken together, the epigraphs summarize the main themes of the book they introduce--namely, the fate of the soul and the quest for God. The river, found in all four epigraphs, connects these two themes to the extent that, in the book, they form the one theme of the quest for an afterlife. The river itself represents the natural path that Thoreau takes to find proof of the spiritual realm.

Thus, in the same way that the rivers wind their way through the countryside does Thoreau's path to a proof of man's immortality lead through nature. It is no coincidence that, as Buell has noted, A Week both "attempts a comprehensive theology" and "comes closer than any of Thoreau's later writing to an unguarded expression of

<sup>49</sup> Stein, "Spoor," p. 8, col. 1.

his relationship to nature."<sup>50</sup> This is not to suggest that there is a carefully reasoned out natural theology in A Week, for Thoreau always stresses the experiential basis of religion above philosophical argument; nevertheless, the book is a sort of catechism of Thoreau's methods of learning about spirit.

The emphasis that Thoreau places on the role of personal experience in a person's coming to any religious conclusions is pointed out by Jonathan Bishop, who approaches Thoreau in terms of Carlyle's phrase "Natural Supernaturalism." "A "Natural Supernaturalist," writes Bishop, "would by definition be someone whose experience of the sacred was mediated by the most local kind of natural particulars; and whose testimony to the possibility of such experience was in turn mediated to us through equally concrete details of language."<sup>51</sup> In this aspect, the close connection between American Transcendentalism and European Romanticism is evident, for it was a tenet of both movements that God could be experienced through nature. Natural Supernaturalism is actually a theological version of the more general Transcendental doctrine of correspondences--that, as Emerson said, "Nature is the symbol of spirit."<sup>52</sup> One distinction, however, is that the emphasis on

<sup>50</sup> Buell, pp. 207-08.

<sup>51</sup> Bishop, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Nature," in Nature, Addresses, and Lectures, Vol. I of The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 17.

the word "symbol" is minimized by the Natural Supernaturalist--Thoreau, for instance, asks near the end of A Week, "Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?" (408). That is, he would have modified Emerson's statement to read, "Nature is spirit." Consequently, although Thoreau does sometimes take a dualistic position and speak as though matter and spirit, body and soul, are distinct, his ideal is to view reality as being monistic--to see the natural and the supernatural as a unified whole.

That Thoreau did, as a Natural Supernaturalist, perceive the sacred in particular facts of nature, is evident throughout A Week. In every chapter there are examples of his using the correspondence between matter and spirit as a means to gain spiritual insight. It is this view of nature that leads him to conclude that there is an afterlife.

In the first chapter of A Week, "Concord River," which is introductory and not part of the narrative of the voyage itself, Thoreau reveals how there can be both physical and spiritual views of the same world. He notes that the river he and his brother will travel on has two names: "Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River" and "Concord" (3). The one name describes the physical nature of the river; and the other, the spiritual. Thoreau's talent of seeing both sides at once is what enables him to apprehend every object in its wholeness--as spirit-infused "Nature" rather than as simply material "nature." Thus, double-vision leads to a unified

vision.

In addition to establishing this Transcendental way of looking at things, Thoreau also, in this first chapter, develops his use of the river as a symbol of time. He calls it "an emblem of all progress" and says, "I resolved to launch myself on its bosom and float whither it would bear me" (11). As Sherman Paul notes, the river is "the literal medium of a spiritual adventure."<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, whereas the actual destination of the brothers' trip was the source of the Merrimack River, in terms of the metaphor their destination is eternity, for that is the source of the river of time. Reminding the reader that eternity is to be found through nature, Thoreau writes, "As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are in time veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die" (7). He continues the theme of nature's eternity in some verses he then includes:

The respectable folks,--  
 Where dwell they?  
 They whisper in the oaks,  
 And they sigh in the hay;  
 Summer and winter, night and day,  
 Out on the meadow, there dwell they.  
 They never die,  
 Nor snivel nor cry,  
 Nor ask our pity  
 With a wet eye. (7)

<sup>53</sup> Paul, p. 200.

As in the previous passage, it is the phrase "never die" in this description of natural deities that reveals the strength of Thoreau's concern about mortality and hope for immortality. That the exact same phrase appears twice in such a short space is itself significant, for Thoreau rarely repeats himself.

Like the river, then, nature is eternal; moreover, when man views it properly it is eternity itself. By launching himself on the river he symbolizes his desire to participate in that realm, and to receive the information that nature provides about eternity first-hand. It is probable that the voyage was originally no more than a holiday for the brothers; in the years after John's death, however, the haze of time permitted Henry to idealize the trip, and the voyage became a symbol for him of the soul's immersion in immortality.

It is in "Saturday" that the actual narration of the voyage begins. The epigraph to the chapter--"Come, come, my lovely fair, and let us try / Those rural delicacies"--is appropriate to the bucolic setting both of this chapter and the book in general; even more proper, however, is the fact that the lines, in their original context, are addressed to the lovely and fair soul of man, for they are taken from "Christ's Invitation to the Soul" by Francis Quarles. The reader is therefore himself invited to understand the entire narrative of the trip as a journey of the soul, and Thoreau emphasizes this in his opening sentence, in which he states that Concord is "a port of entry and departure for the

bodies as well as the souls of men" (12). That is, in the course of describing their departure from Concord on this trip in 1839, Thoreau must have unavoidably thought of John's spiritual departure from the same port in January of 1842.

These two levels of meaning in the book--the narration of a trip on two New England rivers, and the metaphorical account of the soul's voyage to the hereafter--are symbolized in the description of their boat, which was, says Thoreau, "painted green below, with a border of blue, with reference to the two elements in which it was to spend its existence" (12). The two worlds in which the boat will exist--water and air--themselves correspond to the matter and spirit in which men live their lives. Thoreau elaborates further on this symbolic craft: "If rightly made, a boat would be a sort of amphibious animal, a creature of two elements, related by one half its structure to some swift and shapely fish, and by the other to some strong-winged and graceful bird" (13). The comparison of the boat's dual existence to that of an "amphibious animal" echoes the description of man by Sir Thomas Browne, with whose writings Thoreau, who read greatly in seventeenth-century literature, was familiar. Browne calls man "that amphibious piece between a corporal and spiritual essence, that middle form that links those two together, and makes good the method of God and nature . . . ." <sup>54</sup> "Thus," he says, "is man that great and true

<sup>54</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, "Religio Medici," in Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry, ed. A.M. Witherspoon and F. J. Warnke, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 339, col. 1.

amphibium . . . the one visible, the other invisible . . . ."55

In addition to serving as a symbol of man on the stream of time, the boat is also, as noted by Sherman Paul, much like the book,<sup>56</sup> for A Week is also designed to be effective in two realms: the literal, and the intellectual or spiritual. Thus, the book, the boat, and the men are all similar, for all link spirit and matter.

Significantly, the brothers had built the boat themselves. They would as soon buy a ready-made boat as accept someone else's religion. Moreover, Thoreau writes that they had built it in the spring--that is, the boat was like the brothers' self-made religion, for both were ready long before they were needed for the major voyage. "It was strongly built," says Thoreau (13).

Thus the brothers leave Concord in their ship of faith, the religious aspect of the trip being suggested by the silence that pervades their departure: "So with a vigorous shove we launched our boat from the bank, while the flags and bulrushes courtesied a God-speed, and dropped silently down the stream" (12). Some friends waved them farewell from a promontory, but the brothers, "as befits those who are embarked on unusual enterprises," beheld but did not speak; rather, they "silently glided past" (14). There is no dialogue given in this chapter and very little in the rest of the book; thus, A Week has a quiet, almost somber, atmosphere. Generally, the silence is related to Thoreau's concept of religion--

<sup>55</sup> Browne, p. 339, col. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Paul, p. 200.

that it is not to be spoken (J, XI, 113). Particularly, though, it suggests his grief for John, for it brings to mind his unwillingness to speak after his brother's death. In fact, John's death is implied in a stanza of verse included in this chapter:

But since we sailed  
Some things have failed,  
And many a dream  
Gone down the stream. (16)

Inasmuch as Thoreau's writing an account of the trip is his attempt to pursue his brother "down the stream," that is, to ascertain what became of John's soul, Henry is floating "from past to future" in this book both literally and spiritually (17). The future inevitably leads to death of course; thus, he points out that "the season was verging towards the afternoon of the year . . ." (17)

There are several specific examples in this chapter of Thoreau's developing the eschatological theme of A Week. First, in a description of a solitary fisherman that they saw late in the afternoon of that first day of their voyage, he writes that the man's concern is "how to take many fish before the sun sets" (21). The reference to the setting of the sun creates the same solemn atmosphere as the earlier mention of the lateness of the season. This fisherman, moreover, is perhaps a metaphorical description of Thoreau, the solitary artist who must capture many "fishes of thought" before life ends.

Thoreau's concern with mortality is even more apparent in his depictions in this chapter of two other fishermen--both of whom

have died. The one was an old man who had come to America from England. Thoreau recalls how this man "took his way in silence through the meadows" (22). Like the first fisherman described, he too, in addition to being associated with the religious silence, is shown in an afternoon setting; making him an even more explicit symbol of what Thoreau considers man's purpose in nature to be, he points out that "His fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles" (22-23). That is, Thoreau was much like this fisherman also, for he too went to nature not merely for recreation or to secure the physical means of living, but for spiritual reasons of the same type that send others to more conventional forms of religion. This alternate source of spiritual sustenance is not generally recognized, however: he notes that nobody else saw that fisherman, and that he himself is the last to remember him. Soon after he last saw him he died: Thoreau says that he "migrated to new Tyne streams" (22). That is, in spiritual terms, his soul has returned to its native land.

The final fisherman described in this chapter had also died many years ago. Thoreau recalls this fisherman, a drinker, "swinging a scythe in the meadow, his bottle like a serpent hid in the grass; himself as yet not cut down by the Great Mower" (34). He takes pains to note that even men with such "vicious habits" are treated kindly by "Nature," and that they therefore "do not die without priest" (34). Thoreau, although by no means vicious himself, is describing here his own reliance on nature as a priest--a

mediator between man and God. In other words, those who are outside the church have nothing to fear of death, as long as they are, like the Thoreau brothers, in communion with "Nature." Everyone will be redeemed, if not in one way, then in another; ministers such as the Rev. Frost are not the arbitrators of a person's spiritual fate.

Over ten pages of this chapter are devoted to a digression on the varieties of fish in the river; here, too, Thoreau reveals his concern about the afterlife. After having given full descriptions of many species, he points out the fish are dying off because dams and factories are preventing their upstream migrations in the spawning season. On this topic, Thoreau concludes with almost a visionary pronouncement:

Who hears the fishes when they cry? It will not be forgotten by some memory that we were contemporaries. Thou shalt ere long have thy way up the rivers, up all the rivers of the globe, if I am not mistaken. Yea, even thy dull watery dream shall be more than realized. If it were not so, but thou wert to be overlooked at first and at last, then would not I take their heaven. (36)

Thus, like the men of "viscious habits," even the fish will not be neglected, for "some memory," that is, God, will see to it that their dreams of a perfect realm will be actualized in the same way as are man's. Thoreau's not wanting heaven if the fish are not ultimately allowed their ideal existence, although an example of his characteristic use of hyperbole, has an underlying seriousness, for he hoped that all of nature would participate in

paradise. Hence, in the "Tuesday" chapter he writes that, although "not so large in proportion to their bodies," animals do have "souls" (237). He is very democratic in his conception of the afterlife--he is a universalist who believes in the redemption of nature as well as of all men. The psychological benefit of believing in universal salvation would have been great for Thoreau, for if even the fish will have their dreams realized, then he certainly need not fear for his brother's soul. As one critic notes, the fishes' attempt to go back to the place of their origin is itself symbolic of a neoplatonic concept that all of creation will ultimately return back to the "One," or God, from which it has emanated.<sup>57</sup> The movement of the brothers' journey suggests this same philosophy, for they begin in a "Concord," depart out into nature, and finally return to their origin.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, the dams that prevent the fishes' migration signify those religious institutions and creeds which hinder the spirit's free return to its source.

Thus, most of "Saturday," after the solemn description of the brothers' departure, is devoted to melancholy digressions on fishermen and fish which serve as metaphors of man's spiritual circumstances. Both the tone and the technique of the remainder of the book are thereby established. The chapter ends--as do the next five--with an account of making camp and settling down for the night. As in the beginning of the chapter, silence predominates: Thoreau

<sup>57</sup> Boies, p. 353, col. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Boies, p. 352, col. 2.

records no conversation there might have been between the brothers, and in fact, it was so quiet that "only the breathing of the wind" was heard (39).

Appropriate to the day, Thoreau gives the reader two sermons in "Sunday." Early in the narrative part of the chapter he gives a lesson on correspondence--the philosophical perspective that the Transcendentalists used to gain spiritual insight. The second sermon, which is basically an argument against the intolerance and hypocrisy of the established church, makes up the main digression in the chapter. The two themes are connected, for it is because correspondence permits personal inspiration that Thoreau can disregard established doctrine in his attempt to find his own proof of man's immortality.

Although the most dramatic and significant use of correspondence in A Week occurs in "Tuesday," where Thoreau uses it to support his faith in the existence of an afterlife, it is here, in "Sunday," that he introduces the reader to that method of seeing the world. Sherman Paul likely had this chapter in mind when he wrote, "In the Week Thoreau wrote out his faith in nature: in the possibility of sympathetic correspondence."<sup>59</sup> Hence, Sunday morning was so still that the surface of the river was like a mirror. Even the flights of birds were reflected: they seemed "to flit through submerged groves . . . and their clear notes to come up from below" (44).

<sup>59</sup> Paul, p. 196.

That is, there was suddenly a vision of two worlds--the one corresponding perfectly to the other. Thoreau writes, "For every oak and birch, too, growing on the hilltop, as well as for these elms and willows, we knew that there was a graceful ethereal and ideal tree making down from the roots, and sometimes Nature in high tides brings her mirror to its foot and makes it visible" (44-45). It was a "natural Sabbath," for nature was doing the preaching. It used the concrete illustrations of the reflections to inform man that there is another world that corresponds perfectly to this one.

Correspondence is as much a matter of faith as it is a philosophy, however, for its messages depend on the observer's internal reflections as well as on the external scene. Elaborating on this spiritual vision--this ability to see moral and religious meaning in particular facts of nature--Thoreau further explains the method. He writes,

We notice that it required a separate intention of the eye, a more free and abstracted vision, to see the reflected trees and the sky, than to see the river bottom merely; and so are there manifold visions in the direction of every object, and even the most opaque reflect the heavens from their surface. Some men have their eyes naturally intended to the one and some to the other object. (47-48)

That is, although the reflections of "the heavens" exist independently of man, the observer must consciously work to focus on them: a vision of the spiritual world represented by "the heavens" results only when the observer is sufficiently in accord with nature to meet

it halfway. Furthermore, it is not only in idyllic settings--such as Sunday morning rowboat trips--that the correspondence of nature and spirit can be seen: Thoreau states that "even the most opaque" object, that is, the most base thing (such as the question of the dead fish that one of his pupils challenged him with when Thoreau had claimed that all of nature was a miracle), can give some information about the ideal world. For Thoreau, the entire range of matter is penetrated by spirit; for example, he wrote further on in A Week, "To the virtuous man, the universe is the only sanctum sanctorum, and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence" (330). This is an optimistic and liberating view of nature, for the sacred is not confined to a church or a holy book, but can be experienced anywhere. The whole world is "holy ground" (330). As a result, the way is clear for finding spiritual information--especially regarding immortality--in nature. Thoreau concludes the above passage with the observation that there are two ways of perceiving the world--spiritually, or materially; from the point of view of a Natural Supernaturalist, or of a scientist. This anticipates his distinction, further on in this chapter, between "the divine view of nature" and "the popular view" (100). Whereas some men see only the mud of the river bottom, others see heaven.

Despite the optimism in regard to nature in the early part of the chapter, Thoreau's grief still occasionally manifests itself. For instance, he describes the Concord as "a deep, dark, and dead stream" (43) and he includes several stanzas that plaintively describe a personal loss. As already mentioned, the brothers made

the trip on the rivers a few weeks after they had both fallen in love with Ellen Sewall. It is natural, then, that he recalls here having once sailed on the river with "a maiden," and includes such lines as,

Still will I strive to be  
As if thou wert with me;  
Whatever path I take  
It shall be for thy sake. . . . (47)

These lines apply equally well to John and Ellen, and reveal how Thoreau's melancholy at this period was due not only to the loss of his brother, but also <sup>to</sup> the loss of a possible helpmate.

Thoreau's concern with John's fate reveals itself even in minor digressions. For example, in a four-page essay on the purpose of fables, in which he names a dozen or so mythological figures without comment on the actual stories behind them, one character that he does elaborate on is Memnon, who he informs the reader is the "son of Morning, the representative of all promising youths who have died a premature death" (58). Memnon, therefore, represents not only John, but Waldo Emerson and Stearns Wheeler, and it is significant that he is mentioned again in A Week, in "Monday." In this second mention, Thoreau describes having once heard a beautiful music, like that of an Aeolian harp, faintly drifting through the air. He found that it originated from the telegraph wires:

It was the telegraph harp singing its message through the country, its message sent not by men, but by gods.

Perchance, like the statue of Memnon, it resounds only in the morning, when the first rays of the sun fall on it. (185)

Thoreau does not explicitly recount the "message" the gods sent, but only indirectly suggests the contents of the communication: "I heard a fairer news than the journals ever print. . . it hinted at the price of the world itself and of things which are priceless, of absolute truth and beauty" (185). In a journal entry of September 12, 1851, however, he reveals the exact message that he received from the telegraph harp: it said to him,

"Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now travelling on. Know that the goal is distant, and is upward, and is worthy [of] all your life's efforts to attain to." (J, II, 497)

In other words, the digressions in A Week are not irrelevant, but often reveal concerns that stayed with Thoreau. Accordingly, their subjects are frequently the afterlife.

On this day the brothers entered the canal which joined the Concord with the Merrimack, and they passed under a bridge just as people coming out of a church were walking over it. The comparisons that Thoreau knew the churchgoers must have indulged in as they paused to watch the two brothers in their boat leads him to make his own comparisons on religion. These form the second major sermon of the chapter.

One of his main points is that there are many faiths, and that none of them should alarm man, for "What man believes, God

believes" (67). That is, all religions have some truth to them; therefore he asks, "Why need Christians be still intolerant and superstitious?" (68). He is attacking here, of course, the intolerance of such men as Rev. Frost, who in his funeral sermon for John had expressed some doubts about whether Transcendentalists could be saved. In retaliation, therefore, Thoreau inveighs against traditional doctrines and schemes that come between man and the clear sky. Greatly vexed by those Christians who claim to know God so thoroughly that they make pronouncements, not only on other men, but on the character of God himself, Thoreau interrupts the usually quiet tone of the book with the following sharp rebuke:

The perfect God in his revelations of himself has never got to the length of one such proposition as you, his prophets, state. Have you learned the alphabet of heaven and can count three? Do you know the number of God's family? Can you put mysteries into words? Do you presume to fable of the ineffable? Pray, what geographer are you, that speak of heaven's topography? Whose friend are you, that speak of God's personality? Do you, Miles Howard, think that he has made you his confident? Tell me<sup>o</sup> the height of the mountains of the moon, or<sup>f</sup> the diameter of space, and I may believe you, but of the secret history of the Almighty, and I shall pronounce thee mad. (71)

Thoreau is not saying here that there is no God or heaven; rather, his point is that whatever religious conclusions one arrives at, they are necessarily personal and should not lead to bigotry. In fact, he admits both his belief in a "perfect God" and in "his revelations of himself." The problem, points out Thoreau, results when people think they have put the "mysteries into words," for then the mystery is gone and only rigid doctrine remains. Thus,

when Thoreau attempts his own translations of the visions he himself has, he purposely uses a suggestive rather than an explicit, or logical language, and maintains the sense of mystery by often using metaphor.

Being a fair critic, and understanding that there is an ideal Christianity that is distinct from the degenerate forms that have evolved from it, and that he has been condemning, Thoreau also has positive things to say about the religion. Significantly, most of what he selects to commend involves the hereafter, if not explicitly then implicitly. For instance, after having called the New Testament an "invaluable book," he adds, "I think that Pilgrim's Progress is the best sermon which has been preached from this text . . ." (72). Bunyan's theme in that book is, of course, Christian's "Journey toward the Celestial Country."<sup>60</sup> In fact, the book's full title begins, "The pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come. . . ." And in the first chapter, Christian, painfully aware of mortality, runs away from his home and neighbours, crying, "Life! Life! Eternal Life!"<sup>61</sup> He then sets out for Mount Zion, which is heaven. A Week, as has been mentioned already, is also an account of the soul's pilgrimage toward immortality (and a main episode in it is Thoreau's climbing up a mountain and having a heavenly vision). Thus, although Thoreau's book is more indirect,

<sup>60</sup> John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, Everyman's Library, No. 204 (London: J. M. Dent, 1954), p. 173.

<sup>61</sup> Bunyan, p. 13.

both Bunyan and Thoreau, notes one critic, had the same central idea: to embody the theme of the spiritual journey "in clear and personal incidents."<sup>62</sup>

Thoreau's concern with the afterlife is also apparent in his further development of his attack on Christianity as manifested in New England. He says of the New Testament, "I know of no book that has so few readers. There is none so truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular. To Christians, no less than Greeks and Jews, it is foolishness and a stumbling-block" (73). He then selects some verses whose truth he feels is not appreciated:

"Seek first the kingdom of heaven." "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth." "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (73)

Thoreau exclaims, "Think of repeating these things to a New England audience! . . . They never were read, they never were heard" (73-74). The sin that Thoreau is assailing here is the escalating materialism that characterized his country, for he realized that both individual avarice and such national acquisitiveness as evidenced by the Mexican War and the practice of holding slaves--both of which he criticizes further on in the book--were totally ungodly. Thus he suggests that worldly pursuits should be subordinated to

<sup>62</sup> Egbert S. Oliver, "Thoreau and the Puritan Tradition," Emerson Society Quarterly, 44 (1966), 80, col. 2.

a spiritual quest such as the one described in the New Testament. These passages that Thoreau quotes provide a new perspective on his lifelong austerity: his practice of giving up luxury was not an end in itself, practiced only for reasons of economy, but had a spiritual purpose; namely, to attain "the kingdom of heaven" that is mentioned or implied in each of these verses he chose. Accordingly, A Week has the same theme as the Bible verses--how to get to heaven.

This is not to say that Thoreau advocates man's giving up this world in anticipation of a better hereafter. Indeed, his main criticism of Christ involves this very point: "he taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world" (74). Whereas the Christians of his time stressed this world too exclusively, Jesus overemphasized the next world. Thoreau would have parity established between the two, and therefore proposes, "Even here we have a sort of living to get, and must buffet it somewhat longer. There are various tough problems yet to solve, and we must make shift to live, betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can" (74). That is, man must maintain contact with both the spiritual and the material realms, for, like the brothers' boat, he is "a sort of amphibious animal, a creature of two elements." The extent to which Thoreau wanted the best of both worlds for man is shown in his predicating the existence of both spirit and matter in the next world. In the hereafter, however, there would be a complete unity between the two. There would be none of the present conflict between them.

After the discourse on Christianity, Thoreau returns to the narration of the voyage. The brothers are now on the Merrimack River and are entering New Hampshire. Whereas on the Concord they had been travelling downstream, they are now going upstream; the current is not strong however, and the voyage is still pleasant. As Joyce Holland notes, "Going upstream is a deliberate choice,"<sup>63</sup> for it indicates their unwillingness to passively float to the salty ocean--the symbol of oblivion--where all rivers lose their names and forms. In this sense, the ocean is like the Emersonian Over-Soul, a concept toward which Thoreau was not inclined. Thus, rather than continuing on the Concord, which he had earlier called "a dead stream" (61), they actively travel up the new river, in search of its (and therefore life's) source. In addition to being a defiance of fate and mortality, their travelling against the flow of time also represents a journey through the past--it is, as Paul Johnson has noted, a journey "back through cultural habits, institutions, social rituals," and ways of thinking that, although having harmonized with reality in the past, had lost their connections with it.<sup>64</sup> That is, Thoreau is establishing "an original relation to the universe."<sup>65</sup>

The brothers' "nooning" provides an excuse for another

<sup>63</sup> Holland, p. 50, col. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Paul David Johnson, "Thoreau's Redemptive Week," American Literature, 49 (March 1977), 25.

<sup>65</sup> Emerson, "Nature," p. 7.

digression, this time on books. Here Thoreau is explicit about the two ways of looking at the world: he complains that most books "do not in the least teach the divine view of nature, but the popular view" (100). In addition, man learns most, he says, from "frank and honest biographies" (101), an idea that he later modifies in his statement, "Biography . . . should be autobiography" (163). Thoreau is reminding the reader that the lesson A Week teaches is how to see spiritual messages in nature; furthermore, that because the lesson is based in personal experience, it should be verified on the basis of the reader's own experience (his "autobiography").

At the end of "Sunday," Thoreau refers to dreams that the brothers had that night:

One sailor was visited in his dreams this night by the Evil Destinies. . . . But the other happily passed a serene and even ambrosial or immortal night, and his sleep was dreamless . . . a happy, natural sleep until the morning; and his cheerful spirit soothed and reassured his brother, for whenever they meet, the Good Genius is sure to prevail. (119-20)

In this account of the dreams, the optimism that marked the beginning of the chapter, in the description of the "natural Sabbath," appears again, for here, in the very face of the "Evil Destinies" (which can only refer to death), Thoreau asserts that good inevitably prevails. If the brothers' sleeps are interpreted as metaphors of the soul's state after death--which is suggested by the terms "ambrosial" and "immortal"--then Thoreau's meaning is that he believes that good will also prevail after death--

that there will be no eternal nightmares. Indeed, Thoreau did consider each night as a sort of death: in a journal entry for October 5, 1840, he writes, "Each night I go home to rest. Each night I am gathered to my fathers. The soul departs out of the body, and sleeps in God, a divine slumber."<sup>66</sup> Thoreau's faith in the ability of the "Good Genius" to overcome the "Evil Destinies" is typically Transcendental. Like Emerson, who claimed, "I know against all appearances that the universe can receive no detriment; that there is a remedy for every wrong and a satisfaction for every soul,"<sup>67</sup> Thoreau here extends his basic optimism to apply to the next world.

In the first sentence of "Monday," Thoreau reiterates his dualistic view of the world. He writes that "all men, having reinforced their bodies and their souls with sleep . . . were invited to unattempted adventures" (121). Every action in the book, then, can be understood in a spiritual as well as a literal sense.

The first adventure the brothers had that morning was to pass a spot where a ferry was busily transporting people of all sorts across the river--a quarter of a mile wide there. The scene was gloomy: the sun was not yet up, and the morning was gray and foggy. Quite understandably--with such a dreary setting, and a ferryman

<sup>66</sup> Thoreau, journal entry dated October 5, 1840, in Miller, Consciousness, p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," p. 333.

carrying shadowy figures across to another shore--Thoreau compares the scene to Charon's taking passengers across the Styx, and he imagines two of the passengers as being Virgil and Dante. Taking advantage of this opportunity to clarify his views on death, he notes that all of the passengers of the ferry were crossing the river, that the passage "is only a transjectus, a transitory voyage, like life itself, none but the long-lived gods bound up or down the stream" (122-23). In other words, the death symbolized by the people's crossing the river is stated to be as impermanent as this life itself; the passage recalls Thoreau's statement made in his journal shortly after John had died, that death is "a transient phenomenon" (J, I, 328). Although there is nothing to fear of death, it being only a journey across to another shore, he makes it clear in this part of the narrative that he and John were, like the "long-lived gods," bound up the stream of time--that is, he would prefer to be considered an immortal. Thus he notes that their boat crossed over the ferry chain without difficulty, and concludes with a grave pun--"no toll for us that day" (123).

The ferry having been passed, Thoreau leaves the narrative and recounts the events of a famous battle with Indians fought by the former inhabitants of a town they pass. He sympathizes with the dying Indians as much as with the wounded settlers, whom he depicts creeping home toward their settlements. Further on in the day, when the brothers pass the graveyard where some of the men who had fought and died in the battles were buried, he reveals that his concern extends beyond the men's physical fates. He complains that

their tombstones are too large, and should not be lying flat on the ground: "A monument," he says, "should at least be 'star-y-pointing,' to indicate whither the spirit is gone, and not prostrate, like the body it has deserted" (177). He reiterates his belief in the soul's voyage after death in his protest that the epitaphs are not true, for whereas they read "Here lies," it would be more accurate, he feels, for them to be inscribed "There rises" (177). Although Perry Miller suggests that this section is meant to be "jocose," and that "Thoreau disposed of, or tried to dispose of, death by turning it into a joke,"<sup>68</sup> the tone of the passage is too serious to support that interpretation. True, however, is Miller's observation that Thoreau was trying to "dispose of death," for, as noted, that is the theme of the entire book.

Thoreau's concern for the soul is evident even in a digression on reform that is included in this chapter. He suggests that following one's conscience will lead to better results than an excessive obedience of a country's laws, and states, "Let us see if we cannot stay here, where He has put us, on his own conditions. Does not his law reach as far as his light?" (138). For Transcendentalists such as Thoreau, the intuition of God's law, which gives rise to "conscience," forms the highest authority. To illustrate the point, Thoreau chooses a passage from Sophocles' Antigone; significantly, the lines he selects for translation are from the scene in which Antigone explains to her sister that she had decided to bury their

<sup>68</sup> Miller, Consciousness, p. 68.

brother's body even though the King, as a lesson to other would-be rebels, has outlawed its interment. Because the Greeks considered proper burial rites essential to the soul's finding repose (in their mythology Charon would only ferry those souls across the Styx whose bodies had been properly buried), Antigone decides to obey the laws of heaven above those of men, despite the punishment for disobeying the King being death. Thoreau was in the same position as Antigone, for he too was in a way fending for his brother's soul, for although Rev. Frost had not prevented John's burial, he had questioned his religious opinions, thereby suggesting a barrier between John and heaven. Thus, in the same way that Antigone ensures her brother's eternal repose by burying him, Thoreau makes certain of his brother's spiritual happiness by establishing, in A Week, a philosophy of the afterlife in which orthodox Christianity is not a prerequisite to salvation.

Thoreau's spiritual views are further revealed in the lengthiest digression in "Monday"--a comparison of Hinduism with Christianity. Although appreciating the stress on contemplation in Hinduism, he complains that the religion is stagnant and impractical, and expresses his dislike for the belief that the self is absorbed into an Over-Soul. Rather, he prefers Christianity, and commends Jesus for "not being absorbed into Brahm, but bringing Brahm down to earth and to mankind" (141). "The Brahman," he points out, "had never thought to be a brother of mankind as well as a child of God" (141-142); here again Thoreau shows his inclination toward an existence in which matter and spirit, man and God, are united.

Even though Thoreau prefers Christianity to Hinduism, his ideal is a universal religion; therefore, he concludes the digression by recommending that the sacred writings of all nations be collected and printed together as "the Scripture of mankind" (150). He hopes that such a scripture would "liberalize the faith of men" and would become "the Bible, or Book of Books" which would be carried to the ends of the earth (150). A universal religion would, of course, imply a universal salvation, for all faiths and systems, including purely personal ones such as Henry's, would be included. As he says in Walden, where he recommends a similar collection of sacred books, "By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last" (104).

In this idea of the collected scriptures, incidentally, one can see a rationale for Thoreau's inclusion, throughout A Week, of poetic quotations, translations of classical literature, passages from eastern scriptures, and so on. As Stein notes, Thoreau recognized that only "the prophetic, poetic wisdom of the past survives the erosions of time . . . ." <sup>69</sup> In A Week, therefore, he presents inspired writings from many times and places: it is his own version of the book that will serve as a ladder to heaven.

Although the general discussions of religion in "Monday" are useful as indications of Thoreau's religious beliefs, the best insights into his spiritual state are given in the first-person. For example, in the middle of a series of brief translations from Hindu scriptures, he announces, probably influenced by the mystical

<sup>69</sup> Stein, "Spoor," p. 5, col. 1.

content of the translated passages, "I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods, who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?" (145-46). Immediately after this profound pronouncement, Thoreau, without attempting to give any answer to the question he had raised, simply returns to giving more extracts from the eastern scriptures. Further in the chapter, however, in the context of a comparison between the past and the present, he suggests that visions are still possible: "There has always been the same amount of light in the world. . . . The gods are partial to no era, but steadily shines their light in the heavens . . ." (164). These lines bring to mind Emerson's, "The sun shines to-day also,"<sup>70</sup> for, like Emerson, Thoreau is arguing that, if the ancients could have a religion of revelation and personal insight into God and nature, then modern man should be able to have the same. Such a direct relation to spirit would not make a man "insane."

Although Thoreau's most dramatic proof that revelation is still possible is given in "Tuesday," the final pages of "Monday" anticipate the vision in the next chapter. Late Monday night, as the brothers were falling asleep, they heard a distant drumming, which Thoreau describes as coming "from a far-off sphere." His response to the sounds is highly mystical:

These simple sounds related us to the stars. . . . I stop

<sup>70</sup> Emerson, "Nature," p. 7.

my habitual thinking, as if the plow had suddenly run deeper in its furrow through the crust of the world. How can I go on, who have just stepped over such a bottomless skylight in the bog of my life? Suddenly 'old Time winked at me,--Ah, you know me, you rogue,--and news<sup>had</sup> come that IT was well. That ancient universe is in such capital health, I think undoubtedly it will never die. Heal yourselves, doctors; by God I live.

Then idle Time ran gadding by  
 And left me with Eternity alone;  
 I hear beyond the range of sound,  
 I see beyond the verge of sight,--

I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth . . . the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with. (181-82)

That this manifestation of God was triggered by the beating of a drum indicates how important nature--the world of sensation--is in Thoreau's path to spiritual insight. All five senses, he says, were involved in the apprehension of "that everlasting Something" that is revealed when the plow of the mind forces its way through the crust of appearances. Understandably, his insight into God is inextricably bound with a recognition of the true nature of time. Thus, Thoreau is suddenly a confidant of "old Time," and is introduced to "Eternity." Although he learns that the universe "will never die," the revelation is incomplete, for no information is given about the afterlife--his main concern. Knowing that "IT was well" was not enough; he also wanted to be assured that John's soul was well. He therefore leaves the visionary channels open, and in the next chapter he receives more particular information concerning the hereafter.

In "Tuesday," both the narrative of the voyage and the usual expository digressions are subordinated to Thoreau's account of his having once experienced a visionary daybreak on the top of Saddle-back Mountain (now usually called Greylock). Thus Thoreau shifts both time and place, for not only is Greylock in Massachusetts, but the related experience did not occur until the summer of 1844--five years after the trip on the rivers.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, although it is often difficult to ascertain when individual sections of A Week were written--since Thoreau worked on the book from about 1840 until 1848 or 1849--it is clear that this section was composed after John's death.

The actual terminus of the 1839 vacation had been the climbing of New Hampshire's Mount Washington; however, because he had had no memorable experience on that mountain he gives only a short paragraph, in "Thursday," to that ascent. Thus, the Saddle-back account replaces it as the high point of the book. Furthermore, although the account might have been positioned in earlier or later chapters (since it is a digression), it is placed here, in the very center of the book, so that it would receive due emphasis.

Eager to tell the story, Thoreau introduces it in the second paragraph of the chapter. The theme of the digression has already been hinted at in the description of the morning's fogginess:

"Though we were enveloped in mist as usual, we trusted that there was a bright day behind it" (188). That is, though this world is

<sup>71</sup> Harding, Days, p. 171.

often dark, faith suggests that there is a spiritual realm behind it. Furthermore, as noted by one critic, the fog is itself a "tangible symbol of the greater sense of isolation and confusion which follows a momentary insight."<sup>72</sup> The ascent of Greylock indicates the need he felt for more visionary experiences of the sort he had had on Monday night. He wanted to rise above the fog that symbolizes the unenlightened condition of most people.

Thoreau had already, in the previous chapter, sensitized the reader to the type of vision which he would describe in "Tuesday." Not only did he end "Monday" with the account of his insight into "IT" and "Eternity," but he had earlier in the chapter given details which suggest the Saddle-back experience. For example, in a poem about the mountains in the distance there are the lines "I fancy even / Through your defiles windeth the way to heaven . . ." (172), and his assertion that the gods "are partial to no era" has already been mentioned. Thus, the mountain as a path to <sup>the</sup> sacred, the possibility of contemporary revelation, and even the eschatological content of the vision are all anticipated.

In "Tuesday," the sacred atmosphere is developed further in the account of his solitary climb up Saddle-back itself. The valley which he follows up the mountain is frequented by great winds, and his path is likened to "a road for the pilgrim to enter upon who would climb to the gates of heaven"; there is thunder, and Thoreau describes himself "gradually ascending all the while with a sort of awe, and filled with indefinite expectations as to what

<sup>72</sup> Holland, p. 53, col. 1.

kind of inhabitants and what kind of nature I should come to at last" (190). The ascent is thus filled with many of the traditional signs of an encounter with the numinous. Also evident is the discipline which purges the aspirant who would experience the supernatural: Thoreau must make a long climb, and then spend a cold night alone.

The mountaintop is, of course, the archetypal place of mystical vision, and Thoreau himself associated it with revelation throughout his life. He writes in Walden, for instance, of "waiting at evening on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something" (18). His conception of high places as a natural spot for revelation is expanded upon in a journal entry of ~~August~~ <sup>September</sup> 7, 1851: "If by watching a whole year on the city's walls I may obtain a communication from heaven, shall I not do well to shut up my shop and turn a watchman?" (J, II, 471). Clearly, then, Thoreau was always waiting for mystical insight.

The hard climb up the mountain took him the entire afternoon, and he did not reach the summit until the sun was setting. Significantly, he had not taken an already existing trail to the mountaintop, but had proceeded by "the shorter and more adventurous way" (191). His route had been a straight line to the top--he would not take the winding path society recommends as the way to spiritual knowledge. His religious self-reliance is also symbolized in his digging his own well on the mountain. Thirsting, he had used stones and his hands to dig a hole "which was soon filled with pure cold water" (194). The significance of this act is suggested in a passage

found near the end of "Civil Disobedience":

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head.<sup>783</sup>

In addition to standing as a symbol of truth, this spring on the mountaintop is also a symbol of eternity, for such springs are the sources of the rivers which represent the flow of time and the passage of life. Thus he drinks of eternal truth.

The manner in which Thoreau spends the night is equally symbolic. It being a cold night, Thoreau, who for some reason had no blanket along, had laid himself down on a board against the side of the wooden observatory that had been built on the mountaintop by the students of a college. He had thereby hoped to shelter himself somewhat. "But as it grew colder towards midnight," he writes, "I at length encased myself completely in boards, managing even to put a board on top of me, with a large stone on it . . ." (196). No imagination is needed to see that this represents a coffin, complete with tombstone. Here then, is the death before the morrow's symbolic rebirth.

With the morning comes what Thoreau calls "the pith" of the

<sup>73</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in Cape Cod and Miscellanies, Vol. IV of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), pp. 385-86.

digression (197). Having climbed to the top of the observatory to get a better view of the sunrise, he experienced the following:

As the light increased, I discovered around me an ocean of mist, which by chance reached up exactly to the base of the tower, and shut out every vestige of the earth . . . . As the light in the east steadily increased, it revealed to me more clearly the new world into which I had risen in the night, the new terra firma perchance of my future life. There was not a crevice left through which the trivial places we name Massachusetts or Vermont or New York could be seen, while I still inhabited the clear atmosphere of a July morning,--if it were July there. All around beneath me was spread for a hundred miles on every side, as far as the eye could reach, an undulating country of clouds, answering in the varied swell of its surface to the terrestrial world it veiled. It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise. . . . As there was wanting the symbol, so there was not the substance of impurity, no spot nor stain. It was a favor for which to be forever silent to be shown this vision. (197-98)

The above account has received more attention than any other section of A Week, and all who deal with it agree in seeing it as some sort of religious experience. For example, Sherman Paul, who states that the experience on Greylock "gathered every strand of the Week together," sees it as the "search for inspiration . . . the transcendental vocation and religion."<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Bishop reads it as "the journey from the profane to the sacred."<sup>75</sup> And Lawrence Buell interprets it as "a sacred act . . . which led to <sup>a</sup> transcendent experience."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Paul, pp. 223, 225.

<sup>75</sup> Bishop, p. 73.

<sup>76</sup> Buell, p. 221.  
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These critics' interpretations, although on the right path, are not specific enough, for the vision is unequivocally described by Thoreau in terms that denote the afterlife: "the new world," "the new terra firma," "my future life," "paradise." In addition to the names, the characteristics of this realm are also heavenly; thus, the old world of New England had vanished and Thoreau wonders if it were even July there--both place and time have been transcended. Furthermore, it is a place of perfection, for there was neither "spot nor stain." Further on in this section, Thoreau himself draws the analogy between this experience and a journey to heaven when he writes, "As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days' journeys I might reach the region of eternal day . . ." (198). That is, the vision is offered as a proof that such a voyage to the hereafter is possible. The cold night in the wooden case gives way to a glorious experience.

This passage, in which an encounter with the natural world is at the same time an encounter with spiritual truth, is a good example of Transcendental correspondence.<sup>77</sup> For example, the correspondence which the Transcendentalists believed existed between fact and spirit is shown in the clouds "answering" to the contours of the world. The exactness of the harmonious conjunction between the two realms of spirit and matter is emphasized by Thoreau:

<sup>77</sup> Bishop, p. 74.

There were immense snowy pastures, apparently smooth shaven and firm, and shady vales between the vaporous mountains; and far in the horizon I could see where some luxurious misty timber jutted into the prairie, and trace the windings of a water course, some unimagined Amazon or Orinoco, by the misty trees on its brink. (198)

Thus, the world of spirit represented by the clouds is directly related to the material world.

The failure of most people to recognize this correspondence--which the Transcendentalists held as an axiom--is revealed in Thoreau's description of his descent back to the valley later in the day, for the people he meets inform him that the whole day had been cloudy and drizzling. He writes, "The inhabitants of earth behold commonly but the dark and shadowy under side of heaven's pavement . . ." (199). Thus, the Greylock account is a verification of Thoreau's statement in "Sunday" that there are "manifold visions in the direction of every object" and that whereas some men have their eyes intended to see the heavens, others can see only the earth. Those who remain in the lower realms see only dark rain clouds at the same time that Thoreau, from a higher perspective, had seen the sun.

It does not really matter whether Thoreau actually believed in Emerson's theory that every detail of the natural world is symbolic of the spiritual, or if, instead, he purposefully sought out and used, only for artistic purposes, those objects and scenes that properly correlated with what was already in his mind, for, in either case, the Saddle-back passage reveals how important it was

to him to find proof of an afterlife. In fact, this episode is a model of Thoreau's more famous attempt to come in contact with the proof of immortality that nature can provide. His going to the mountain, spending the night, and then being inspired by the dawn, corresponds to the pattern of Walden, in which he moves to his hut, experiences the death represented by winter, and then is reborn with the spring. He himself writes in Walden, "The day is an epitome of the year. The night is the winter, the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and noon is the summer" (301).

The vision on top of Saddle-back had given Thoreau a stronger faith in immortality. Thus, he ends the digression with a metaphorical description of the ascent to the hereafter that he anticipates: he writes that on the previous evening, when he had been on the mountaintop, he had seen the peaks of higher mountains by which he hoped "to climb to heaven again" (200).

The remainder of "Tuesday" in no way reaches the heights of this first digression. Much of it is narrative; for instance, there are descriptions of the river and the idyllic life of the boatmen who sail barges on it. Significantly, the one other long digression included in this chapter also concerns the same 1844 trip recounted in the Saddle-back section. Although mention of the vision is not made in this digression, Thoreau's returning to the same excursion reveals how important it had been to him. And, inasmuch as his mind is still on the afterlife, it is therefore on the theme of death. Thus, when he returns to the narrative and describes their shooting a pigeon for their supper, he reflects on the tragedy of death, and notes that

"Nature herself has not provided the most graceful end for her creatures," for, "True, 'not a sparrow falleth to the ground without our Heavenly Father's knowledge,' but they do fall, nevertheless" (236-37). Feeling guilty about killing for food, he concludes that men should be vegetarian, so as to avoid depriving animals of their existence. In other words, he desires a realm in which death is not a part of life. The theme of death is evident in almost every part of A Week; for example, in this chapter he introduces some translations from the minor Greek poet Anacreon with the epigraph "'Nor has he ceased his charming song, for still that lyre, / Though he is dead, sleeps not in Hades'" (238).

Thoreau's vision on Saddle-back convinced him that there is an afterlife; in the final three chapters of A Week he reiterates this belief--the narrative, the expository digressions, and the autobiographical and historical anecdotes all work together to bring the reader to the same persuasion.

"Wednesday," in which Thoreau's famous essay on friendship is found, is typical of the way his concern about John's death and his hope for an afterlife manifest themselves continually. Early that day, the brothers pass some Indian graves which can be seen from the river, and, as in "Monday," where Thoreau used their passing a graveyard as an occasion to disclose his belief that monuments and epitaphs should emphasize the spirit's rising from the dead body, here he uses the Indian burial ground as a basis for more remarks

on death. He writes, "These mouldering elements are slowly preparing for another metamorphosis, to serve new masters, and what was the Indian's will ere long be the white man's sinew" (251). That is, Thoreau believed that the only resurrection the present body would participate in would be a purely natural one. Like Emerson, who perhaps influenced him in this regard, he believed that the doctrine of the resurrection should be understood to refer to the spirit and not to the body.<sup>78</sup> In the work-sheets for A Week he wrote, "I believe in a speedy resurrection of the body in some other form,--in corn for fodder--in wood for fuel; in grain and flowers for use or beauty,"<sup>79</sup> Yet, as mentioned earlier, Thoreau did not believe that the hereafter would be purely spiritual. In the elegy for John, he had written, for example, "What season didst thou find?"<sup>80</sup> Thus, he believed in a sensuous heaven but did not believe in the spirit's reunion with the same body that it possessed before death. Since a sensuous realm implies a physical being that would be able to experience sensation, the only remaining possibility is that the spirit must take on a totally new body.

Of course, Thoreau is not, and would never presume to be, able to explain by what exact means new bodies will come to replace the old, but having recognized that nature itself will never resurrect

<sup>78</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," pp. 324-27

<sup>79</sup> Thoreau, work-sheets for A Week, in Miller, Consciousness, pp. 69-70.

<sup>80</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 151.

bodies, the only alternative is to posit that a supernatural power will be involved. The magical quality of the soul's being embodied a second time is revealed in the digression in this chapter on a famous Indian "wise man" and "powwow" who was said to have been able to perform mysterious feats involving rebirth. Thoreau quotes from an early Massachusetts historian who wrote that the Indians believed this medicine man

"could make water burn, rocks move, and trees dance, and metamorphose himself into a flaming man; that in winter he could raise a green leaf out of the ashes of a dry one, and produce a living snake from the skin of a dead one, and many similar miracles." (267)

Perhaps one of the reasons Thoreau was throughout his life interested in Indians was that their faith was not as bound by science as was the New England Unitarianism of his time, which used rationalism to deny the possibility of miraculous events that would seem to go against natural law. Since nature is the source of revelation, then the Indian, who is closer to it than the white man, would have been expected by Thoreau to have greater spiritual insight.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, in "Sunday," which dealt largely with religion, he had written of the Indian,

By the wary independence and aloofness of his dim forest life he preserves his intercourse with his native gods, and is admitted from time to time to a rare and peculiar society with Nature. He has glances of starry recognition

<sup>81</sup> Ethel Seybold, Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics (1951; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1969), p. 11.

to which our saloons are strangers. (55)

These recognitions of the spiritual world turn out, then, to involve an intimacy with the miracles of rebirth that would be scoffed at by the general public of Thoreau's time.

Thoreau's discontent with both the science and the theology of his day is further disclosed five pages after his account of the Indian powwow, in a passage in which he uses the occupations of doctor and priest to symbolize the conflicting philosophies of materialism and spiritualism:

Priests and physicians should never look one another in the face. . . . They could not come together without laughter, or a significant silence, for the one's profession is a satire on the other's, and either's success would be the other's failure. It is wonderful that the physician should ever die, and that the priest should ever live. Why is it that the priest is never called to consult with the physician? Is it because men believe practically that matter is independent of spirit? . . . There is need of a physician who shall minister to both soul and body at once, that is, to man. Now he falls between two stools. (272-73)

As evidenced by this passage, Thoreau accurately perceived the dilemma of modern man, who is left in a void between the opposing claims of science and religion. Whereas the doctor treats man as purely a material organism, and disregards the spiritual, the clergyman does the opposite. Because neither recognizes that interdependence of body and spirit which makes the whole man, Thoreau must be his own physician. Near the end of "Monday" he had written, "Heal yourselves, doctors; by God I live" (181). The religious philosophy that Thoreau eventually works out stresses

both sides of man's dual nature.

The way in which spirit and matter interpenetrate each other in Thoreau's world view is evident in the essay on friendship, which comprises more than a third of "Wednesday." For Thoreau, spirit is reflected by ideal human relationships in the same way that it is mirrored by nature. Thus, as one critic notes, Thoreau in his friendship essay is "describing an experience in which the divine may be disclosed."<sup>82</sup> For instance, Thoreau writes that certain friendships "transcend our earthly life, and anticipate Heaven for us," and that love "discovers a new world, fair and fresh and eternal, occupying the place of the old one" (285). In other words, friendship gives him the same insight into eternity as did the vision on top of Saddle-back. The vision on the mountain showed that church is not the only place to find God, for the sacred can be experienced anywhere. Here then, in his discussion of friendship, he asserts that divinity reveals itself through human love. He writes, "As surely as the sunset in my latest November shall translate me to the ethereal world . . . so surely my Friend shall forever be my Friend, and reflect a ray of God to me . . ." (303). There is correspondence not only between God and nature, but also between God and man; consequently, he idealizes friendship in this essay.

The conviction with which Thoreau in the above passage states

<sup>82</sup> William J. Wolf, Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974), p. 72.

his belief in the soul's final translation to the "ethereal world" is partly due to his now having two mutually supporting proofs of God--nature's beauty and man's love. His assertiveness is also due, of course, to his desire that his friend, that is, his brother, be so "forever." His optimism here is likely an overcompensation for the feelings of loss he must have experienced while writing this essay, which is basically a tribute to John. For although some of it was written as early as the fall of 1839,<sup>83</sup> and therefore likely expresses his yearning for Ellen Sewall, it was not completed until 1848.<sup>84</sup> Thus, John is surely the major reference. This is indicated by direct statement: "My Friend is not of some other race or family of men, but 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. He is my real brother'" (302). The last sentence comes from a March 20, 1842, journal entry.

This essay, then, is as animated by John's spirit as is A Week in general, and it is therefore natural that much of it concerns not the finding, but the losing of friends. For instance, the following lines are part of a poem that is included early in the essay:

Sea and land are but his neighbors,  
 And companions in his labors,  
 Who on the ocean's verge and firm land's end  
 Doth long and truly seek his Friend. (279)

That it is Thoreau who is searching is revealed in the first lines

<sup>83</sup> Thoreau, Journal, I, 107-08.

<sup>84</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 238.

of another poem in this chapter: "My life is like a stroll upon the beach, / As near the ocean's edge as I can go" (255). In both of these poems, as in the second and third epigraphs to A Week, the ocean serves as a symbol of death. Thus, separation and the hope for reunion are a major theme. Further on, for example, he writes that it is not until friends say farewell that "we begin to keep them company" (282). This is similar to the notion Thoreau expressed immediately after John's death: Lidian Emerson reported in one of her letters to her sister, "He says John is not lost but nearer to him than ever. . . ." <sup>85</sup> Thoreau's preoccupation with leave-taking in this essay is most likely the result of the final traumatic hours he spent with his dying brother. This is especially suggested by a passage which deals with how best to say good-bye to a friend:

Suppose you go to bid farewell to your Friend who is setting out on a journey; what other outward sign do you know than to shake his hand? Have you any palaver ready for him then? . . . any statement which you had forgotten to make?--as if you could forget anything. No, it is much that you take his hand and say Farewell. . . . It is even painful, if he is to go, that he should linger so long. If he must go, let him go quickly. Have you any last words? (290)

Although this whole section, with its implicit reference to death in the idea of the "journey," brings to mind a deathbed scene, the word "linger," which is often used to describe a person's being on the threshold of death, is especially suggestive of the actual situation Thoreau is writing about here. Thus, as though remembering

<sup>85</sup> Letter of Lidian Emerson, in Myerson, p. 106.

his brother's final agony, he states that it is "painful" when the friend does not "go quickly." Knowing that many of his readers will one day be in the same position that he was, he therefore gives this advice on how to say good-bye.

In addition to this counsel, Thoreau offers explicit suggestions concerning dead friends. He writes, "Even the death of Friends will inspire us as much as their lives. . . for our Friends have no place in the graveyard" (303). Likewise, in the comments on graveyards in "Monday," he had expressed a similar attitude: "I have no friends there" (178). His meaning, of course, is that the part of the friend that he loved--the spirit--cannot be buried, but continues to live both in the memory of those who remain, and in the afterlife. Thus, he again indicates his belief in the continued existence of friends on the other side of death: he sends his words "to our cis-Alpine and cis-Atlantic Friends" (303). As he does elsewhere in the book--for example, in the epigraphs to it and in the Saddle-back section--he is using here the natural barriers of the ocean and the mountains as metaphors of the division between life and death. He repeats his message for emphasis: "Also this other word of entreaty and advice to the large and respectable nation of Acquaintances, beyond the mountains;--Greeting" (303). Although not explicit, the meaning is clear: he believes that a whole nation of spiritual friends exists in the next world. To ignore them would not only deprive him of a source of solace concerning John's death, but would be a denial of his own destiny.

Thus he acknowledges their existence, and sends his greetings, all the time bearing in mind that he too is already on the path to the other realm. Employing the same metaphors of death, he writes that "while from the heights I scan the tempting but unexplored Pacific Ocean of Futurity, the ship is being carried over the mountains piecemeal on the backs of mules and llamas, whose keel shall plow its waves, and bear me to the Indies" (312-13). Thus was Thoreau confident in the ship of faith that would take him on his longest voyage--westward, across the largest ocean.

It is faith that enables him to accept, as did John, whatever fate would bring him. He writes, "I cannot change my clothes but when I do, and yet I do change them. . . . every man lives till he--dies" (312). That is, he could accept death because he believed that, after it, a new day would dawn.

That Thoreau had convinced himself that death is transitory is evident throughout "Wednesday." Not only did the major essay of the chapter, that on friendship, center upon the loss of friends and the hope for reunion, but even such a minor passage as an account of the singing of a grasshopper suggests to him an analogy with death: he writes, "For our lifetime the strains of a harp are heard to swell and die alternately, and death is but 'the pause when the blast is recollecting itself'" (314). Whereas in "Tuesday" Thoreau had revealed the natural source of his views of the afterlife, in "Wednesday" he shows how his faith in the existence of the hereafter is focused on his "Friend," his "real brother."

Having established his faith in man's immortality, Thoreau can bring himself more directly to confront death. Consequently, the elegiac tone of A Week becomes increasingly dominant in "Thursday." The morning begins with the "ominous sound of rain-drops" on the cotton roof of the brothers' tent, and it seemed to Thoreau as though "the whole country wept" (317). Despite the weather, they set out through the drizzle and fog, and Thoreau notes that although their clothes were wet, they kept their thoughts dry. That is to say, whatever may befall the physical man, the inner spirit remains unharmed: he writes, "'Nothing that naturally happens to man can hurt him, earthquakes and thunder-storms not excepted,' said a man of genius, who at this time lived a few miles farther on our road" (319). Death, of course, is one of the natural things that happens to man; like Emerson, however, Thoreau believed that only the best inevitably occurs--as in Emerson's poem "Brahma," death takes place only on the level of appearance. Thus, all of experience, both pleasant and unpleasant, is valuable, for all inevitably leads to good; therefore Thoreau writes, "Cold and damp,--are they not as rich experience as warmth and dryness?" (320). This is why, when he wrote to Isaiah Williams about John's death, he stated, "For my own part I feel that I could not have done without this experience."<sup>86</sup> He felt that he had learned much from the event: in "Sunday" he had written that the slow and muddy Concord River "is a dead stream, but its scenery is the more suggestive to the contemplative

<sup>86</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 66.

voyager" (61). That is, many of his ideas originate from his contemplation of death.

It is in this chapter that Thoreau recounts the overland part of their vacation. Here, in three paragraphs, he covers the week that they spent travelling to Mount Washington and back. Although separate from the voyage on the rivers, he associates this part of the trip with the theme of the spiritual quest as well. Their land travel is compared to that of "pilgrims" (324), and he writes that "sincere traveling is no pastime, but <sup>it</sup> is as serious as the grave, or any part of the human journey . . ." (326). His use here of the epithet "the human journey" to describe life indicates the general metaphorical meaning Thoreau intends the voyage related in A Week to have for the reader.

Leaving the short account of their land journey, Thoreau introduces the narrative of the return voyage down the river with a plaintive epigraph from George Herbert's poetry:

"Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky,  
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night,  
For thou must die." (335)

The theme of mortality expressed in these verses is further suggested in a reference Thoreau makes to the lateness of the season, for by this time it was the second week of September. He notes, "As the season was further advanced, the wind now blew steadily from the north . . ." (335). The wind, then, is opposite to the south wind, which was to Thoreau a sign of rebirth (J, I,

328).<sup>87</sup> Thus, not only does each day have to die into night, but each summer must turn into fall. The theme, then, of the return voyage is death; this is clearest in the central digression of the chapter--the true story of Hannah Dustan's escape from the Indians.

Hannah Dustan, Thoreau informs the reader, was a Massachusetts settler who in 1697 had been taken captive in an Indian raid. Although she did not know the fate of her husband and her seven elder children, she had seen her home burned and "her infant's brains dashed out against an apple tree" (342). Along with her nurse, she was taken to the wigwam of her captor, where, in addition to the Indian's family, which included seven children, there was also a captive English boy. One night, Hannah and the two others, using tomahawks, killed the entire family in their sleep, with the exception of a favourite boy and one wounded squaw, who fled. The three then escaped down the river, "the still bleeding scalps of ten of the aborigines" lying in the bottom of the canoe they had stolen (342). Rowing down the same part of the Merrimack as Dustan had gone down, Thoreau identifies himself with the fleeing party, and reduces the distance between his own situation and theirs by using the present tense in his account: "They are thinking of the dead whom they have left behind . . ." (343). The story is a dramatic reminder of the reality of death; the horrible details are included so as to make a forceful and lasting impression.

<sup>87</sup> I am indebted to Dr. W. G. Heath, Jr., for this suggestion.

Jonathan Bishop has interpreted the tale of Hannah Dustan as part of Thoreau's "experience of the sacred."<sup>88</sup> Since death is a part of nature, it would also be in Thoreau's eyes a part of God, for even in this chapter he calls nature "the art of God" (339). The Hannah Dustan story, then, stands as one more of Thoreau's attempts to come to terms with reality. Earlier in the chapter he had given the following statement of his philosophy of life:

The frontiers are not east or west, north or south; but wherever a man fronts a fact, though that fact be his neighbor. . . . Let him build himself a log house with the bark on where he is, fronting IT, and wage there an Old French war for seven or seventy years, with Indians and Rangers, or whatever else may come between him and the reality, and save his scalp if he can. (323-24)

Whereas Thoreau, in his attempt to front reality, spent nights alone on top of mountains, and, following the advice here, built himself a house in the woods, Hannah Dustan's confrontation with "IT" was her experience with the Indians, who represent that part of reality called death. Not only had she saved her scalp, but she had even taken the scalps of the enemy--she had killed death. Furthermore, her deeds were a type of harrowing of hell, for she had rescued the young English boy, perhaps a John or Jonathan. This is why Thoreau considers her a heroic figure. At the end of the story he shows her compensated for the evil she has experienced, for she is reunited with her family. The pattern in this digression is the same as that in other key sections of A Week. For example, whereas in the Saddle-

<sup>88</sup> Bishop, p. 88.

back episode the movement was from day to night to a new morning, the progression here is from life before the Indian attack, to the dark deaths that resulted from the raid, and then back to a new life with her family.

A melancholy atmosphere has dominated all of "Thursday." The day had begun with rain, and the major digression describes violent death. The final scene in the chapter depicts the coming of the north wind, whose rustling the leaves woke the brothers in the night. Thoreau writes, "There seemed to be a great haste and preparation throughout Nature, as for a distinguished visitor . . ." (355). In the same way that every life must lead to death, does the summer give way to fall and winter.

"Friday," which describes the last day of the voyage, is Thoreau's fullest exposition on man's immortality; nowhere else in his writings does he express his faith in the hereafter as extensively. As in the Saddle-back digression, his beliefs are based not on church doctrine but on personal intuitions resulting from his immersion in nature. Aiming at convincing others of the validity of this path to spiritual knowledge, he continues the same baptism of the reader into nature that has been going on throughout A Week.

This final chapter is dominated by two associated settings: the autumn and the sunset. The mournful season of fall had been suggested earlier in the book. Even in "Saturday," which described the first day of the trip, "the season was verging towards the

afternoon of the year . . ." (17). Thursday night, however, had been "the turning-point in the season," and Thoreau writes, "We had gone to bed in summer, and we awoke in autumn . . ." (356). As Lawrence Buell has noted, this movement is in marked distinction to Walden, which ends with spring.<sup>89</sup> A Week is therefore the more somber book.

Actually, however, Thoreau skilfully makes the season seem further along than it really was on their vacation. For instance, in a digression on the Concord annual Cattle-Show, the town's fall fair, he includes such details as "the breath of the October wind" strewing the ground with the leaves of elms and buttonwoods (358). The October setting of this digression is part of Thoreau's thematic use of the seasons in A Week, for the fall reinforces the theme of death. Johnson, in his article on the book, describes Thoreau's use of the fall as an important "discovery," for it prefigures his use of the seasons in Walden.<sup>90</sup> Thus, whereas in Walden Thoreau would strengthen his theme of cyclical rebirth by deliberately condensing his two-year stay into one, and ending the book with an account of the spring even though he had actually left the pond in late summer, he patterns A Week so that it moves from summer to fall, when in reality the brothers' vacation had ended on September 13,<sup>91</sup> a full week before the autumnal equinox.

<sup>89</sup> Buell, p. 207.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, p. 29.

<sup>91</sup> Harding, Days, p. 92.

It is to stress the theme of death, therefore, that in "Friday" Thoreau gives such details as the changing colours on the hills and the birds gathering into flocks. The river itself is described as being grayer, and an autumnal wind reportedly sighed. To remind the reader of the concrete meaning behind the phrase "the fall of the year," he writes, "The leaves were fast ripening for their fall . . ." (357). The speed with which summer becomes autumn is a traditional metaphor of the fleetingness of man's life, and that Thoreau has this meaning in mind is explicit in his including the following lines from Francis Quarles:

"And what's a life? The flourishing array  
Of the proud summer meadow, which to-day  
Wears her green plush, and is to-morrow hay." (377)

The more personal associations Thoreau makes between the death of summer and his own grief about the death of his brother are revealed in a poem that he had written in the first autumn following John's death,<sup>92</sup> and that he includes in this chapter:

I am the autumnal sun,  
With autumn gales my race is run;  
. . . . .  
I am all sere and yellow,  
And to my core mellow.  
The mast is dropping within my woods,  
The winter is lurking within my moods,  
And the rustling of the withered leaf  
Is the constant music of my grief. (404)

As Carl Bode notes, Thoreau in this poem "has absorbed within

<sup>92</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 302.

himself the entire autumnal scene."<sup>93</sup> Consequently, every natural fact of the autumn--every leaf even--reminds him of his loss. As stated in the poem, the mood in autumn (and therefore in "Friday") is that of "winter," which is the death that the fall heralds. It is this expectation of immanent death that explains Thoreau's stressing the afterlife in this chapter. Thus he includes the following stanza from a poem on autumn by his friend W. E. Channing:

"So fair we seem, so cold we are,  
So fast we hasten to decay,  
Yet through our night glows many a star,  
That still shall claim its sunny day." (378)

The speed with which human life hastens toward death is symbolized in this chapter by the ever-blowing north wind, which "rolled like a flood over valley and plain" and hurried the brothers down the stream of time (384). Knowing that they could not stop the passing of the seasons, they made full use of the wind and "made about fifty miles" in the one day (420). In an extended metaphor in which Thoreau compares the boat's sail to a harness and the wind to a wild steer, he conveys the exhilaration that results when faith in immortality permits one to journey willingly homeward toward death:

Thus we sailed, not being able to fly, but as next best,  
making a long furrow in the fields of the Merrimack  
toward our home, with our wings spread, but never  
lifting our heel from the watery trench: gracefully  
plowing homeward with our brisk and willing team, wind

<sup>93</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 353.

and stream, pulling together . . . . (385)

In "Saturday" Thoreau had defined the boat as a "creature of two elements" that was half fish and half bird--a description symbolic of man himself. Here then, in "Friday," the boat is fully cooperating with both elements, and its speeding down the river gives a picture of Thoreau's ideal conception of man--his spiritual wings fully spread, yet his feet still firmly on the earth. Both literally and metaphorically the brothers are on their way home; Thoreau writes that it was "very near flying"--an indication of how heavenly their experience was.

The digression on artistic vision which Thoreau includes in this chapter fits in well, therefore, for the wind provides a natural context for a discussion of the currents of inspiration. His reason for including the subject here is his wanting to establish his right to assert the truth of the intuitions he expresses throughout A Week. As Charles Berryman has pointed out, Thoreau saw his writing as a combination of art and prophecy, and he notes, "The first problem for anyone writing as a prophet is how to establish the unique validity of his truth."<sup>94</sup> Thus, Thoreau, wanting to enlighten his fellow man concerning the hereafter, had to first convince his reader that his views were not purely imaginary, but were based on truth. The way he goes about this is to reestablish the poet in the spiritual role that

<sup>94</sup> Charles Berryman, "The Artist-Prophet: Emerson and Thoreau," Emerson Society Quarterly, 43 (1966), p. 81, col. 1.

he once held in the past. He complains that in the eyes of society the bard has lost the "sacredness" he once had, and writes, "Formerly he was called a seer, but now it is thought that one man sees as much as another" (392). Actually, says Thoreau, the poet is decidedly different from other men, for he is "no tender slip of fairy stock . . . but the toughest son of earth and of Heaven, and by his greater strength and endurance his fainting companions will recognize the God in him" (362). Here, then, even though it goes somewhat against the Transcendental philosophy that each man should be spiritually self-reliant, Thoreau suggests that because the poet is more divine than other men, his vision should be acknowledged by society. Further elaborating the distinction between the poet and the common man, Thoreau claims, "The poet's body even is not fed like other men's, but he sometimes tastes the genuine nectar and ambrosia of the gods, and lives a divine life" (365). To show how this special nature of the poet can benefit mankind, he offers a picture, in his discussion on the ancient bard Ossian, of the poet's communicating such insights into the hereafter as would inspire heroism in those who are still alive. He writes that "by a convulsion of nature, the bard allows us a short and misty glance into futurity . . ." (368), and he then quotes some lines of poetry which depict a type of Valhalla that the bard sees the soul depart to. In other words, Thoreau is underlining the purpose of the poet as a spiritual guide, and is giving credibility to the suggestive glances into the future that he himself has given--for instance, his Saddle-back account.

In his final digression on inspired writing, Thoreau unabashedly describes it in terms usually reserved for religious writings. He writes that it is "always correct" and "vibrates with life forever," and concludes, "It is sacred, and to be read with reverence, as the works of nature are studied" (401). That is, inspired writing can be as revelatory as nature itself. He is, of course, writing about A Week in this section; thus, when in a journal entry of 1851 he thought back about the book, he compared it to "those Egyptian temples which are open to the heavens above" (J, II, 274).

In his role as an inspired poet, Thoreau is concerned with prophecies which center upon death. In this chapter, too, as in the discussion on tombstones in "Monday," and on the mouldering Indian remains in "Wednesday," the grave appears. He tells the story of the site of an Indian's grave being revealed when the weight of a spring flood caused the earth to sink over the spot. Although the depression had eventually filled and the locality had been forgotten, Thoreau notes that, while no future flood could cause the earth to settle a second time, "yet, no doubt, nature will know how to point it out in due time, if it be necessary, by methods yet more searching and unexpected" (381). There is a suggestion of a resurrection here, even though in the "Wednesday" digression on the Indian graves he had proposed that the only resurrection of crumbling bones will be in the form of other natural bodies. But it is inevitable that there be some inconsistency in the views expressed in A Week for, as Carl Hovde notes, the book was written from time to time over a period

of roughly nine years.<sup>95</sup> When Thoreau first began it he was about twenty-three; when he finished, he was thirty-one. Nevertheless, although there are some discrepancies in his ideas concerning the details of the afterlife, his belief that a hereafter exists does not waver.

When there are incongruities in Thoreau's views of the spiritual world, as expressed in various parts of A Week, the general pattern is a move toward religious orthodoxy toward the end of the book. This is evident in his attitude to resurrection, which was mentioned above. Whereas in "Wednesday" he postulated only a natural metamorphosis, in the "Friday" passage he intimates, by using the suggestive word "unexpected," a more mysterious type of resurrection. Similarly, although in "Sunday" he had written that "there is no infidelity, nowadays, so great as that which prays, and keeps the Sabbath, and rebuilds the churches" (77), in "Friday," in a digression on Chaucer, he praises that author's "familiar, yet innocent and reverent manner of speaking of his God" (398), and adds, "How rarely in our English tongue do we find expressed any affection for God!" (399). The tone in "Sunday" was very condemning of all manifestations of Christianity; in the "Friday" passage, Thoreau almost sounds like a minister. By the end of A Week he has even assimilated the anthropomorphism of Christianity, for he writes, "If Nature is our mother, then God is our father" (398-99).

The likely reason for Thoreau's more conservative religious

<sup>95</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 200.

stand at the end of the book is that, whereas in the earlier chapters his purpose was often social criticism, and he had therefore taken the role of devil's advocate, by "Friday" his concern had narrowed. If he could not show all of society the light, he would at least record that he had seen it. To communicate his own enlightenment, he describes his insights in a traditional, and therefore recognizable, language.

His desire to be understood as a religious person who is as much, if not more, concerned with the salvation of the soul as are his neighbours, is evident in the last lengthy poetic quotation that he includes in A Week. In addition, this quotation, from a seventeenth-century poem entitled "No trust in Time,"<sup>96</sup> makes clear that the sunset which dominates the final pages of the book is intended to symbolize the end of life. The sestet reads,

"Therefore, as doth the pilgrim, whom the night  
Hastes darkly to imprison on his way,  
Think on thy home, my soul, and think aright  
Of what's yet left thee of life's wasting day:  
Thy sun posts westward, passed is thy morn,  
And twice it is not given thee to be born." (417)

Thus, all the cycles of the book harmonize in their coming to their ends: the summer, the week, the day, and the journey itself are nearly spent. It is Thoreau's last chance to declare his views on the afterlife in this, his elegy for John.

<sup>96</sup> Ernest L. Leisy, "Sources of Thoreau's Borrowings in A Week," American Literature, 18 (1946-47), p. 43. The quotation is from a sonnet by William Drummond.

The anxiety Thoreau must have felt about death, especially about the spiritual fate of John, is evident in the abundant pictures of the hereafter given in the final third of "Friday." Wanting to make his faith in the afterlife clear for all those neighbours who, like Rev. Frost, might have some doubts about the salvation of such Transcendentalists as he and his brother, he even skirts redundancy in his many assertions that there is a heaven awaiting all.

Many of the intimations of immortality Thoreau offers are based on the autumn and sunset that form the narrative context of this part of the book. Since the falling leaves and westering sun were originally used to establish the theme of mortality, it seems almost a contradiction that they are now used to suggest the hereafter, but this is part of the paradox of Thoreau's view of death--that it leads to new life. Thus, he writes,

[W]e are sensible that behind the rustling leaves, and the stacks of grain, and the bare clusters of the grape, there is the field of a wholly new life, which no man has lived; that even this earth was made for more mysterious and nobler inhabitants than men and women. In the hues of October sunsets, we see the portals to other mansions than those which we occupy . . . ." (403)

The hint here of Jesus' statement "In my Father's house are many mansions"<sup>97</sup> is a good example of the basic conventionality of Thoreau's view of heaven; nevertheless, there are some differences between his conception and the usual one. For example, although a transcendent realm is suggested by the description of its portals

<sup>97</sup> John 14.2

being in the skies, the ultimate location of his Elysium, Thoreau reveals, is "this earth." As mentioned earlier, Thoreau's conception of man as a dynamic union of matter and spirit applies to the next world as much as to this. Thus, in reaction to the overly ethereal heaven anticipated by the public, he writes that man must not only be spiritualized, "but naturalized, on the soil of the earth" (405). He concludes, "Here or nowhere is our heaven" (405). That is, although his mention of "more mysterious and nobler inhabitants than men and women" at first glance suggests that he expects a wholly new being to live in the coming paradise, he is actually describing a purer version of man. He characterizes this new man to considerable extent:

We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. . . . The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. (408)

The senses, then, are more important than the intellect in both finding out about and experiencing heaven. Thoreau writes that "there is only necessary a moment's sanity and sound senses, to teach us that there is a nature behind the ordinary . . ." (409). As it is though, most men have not yet come to the awareness that this world is itself a part of heaven: "We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon, and stars, and shall not see clearly till after nine days at least" (411).

Although man in this realm is still seeing through a glass darkly, the amount of beauty that is already evident to him suggests the supernatural world on which this one is based. After a consideration of such heavenly things as music and echoes, he concludes:

These things imply, perchance, that we live on the verge of another and purer realm, from which these odors and sounds are wafted over to us. The borders of our plot are set with flowers, whose seeds were blown from more Elysian fields adjacent. They are the pot-herbs of the gods. Some fairer fruits and sweeter fragrances wafted over to us betray another realm's vicinity. (407)

The beauty in nature is seen by Thoreau as proof of an ideal Beauty; this world is considered as an emanation which must have a source. Beautiful objects cause man to wonder "who set them up, and for what purpose" (383). Thus Thoreau uses natural objects to infer the existence of a spiritual realm; the implication is that if man separates himself from nature he would lose his religious vision and his chance to experience some of heaven in this world. He would also lose the assurance that there is an afterlife. That is, Thoreau lived in nature as much as he did in order to be close to John.

As an example of how faint intimations of the existence of "another and purer realm" may eventually be proven true, Thoreau draws a lengthy analogy with astronomy. Again he is using a form of natural theology--reasoning from this world to the next. He points out that Copernicus, because the telescope had not been invented by his time, could only theorize that Venus was not merely a spark in the sky but was actually another world; and that it was not until after that astronomer's death that science had advanced

far enough to provide another man, Galileo, with the instrument needed to verify this theory. From this example of a man's confidently predicting, without having definite proof, the existence of another world, and then being proven correct after his death, Thoreau reasons,

I am not without hope that we may, even here and now, obtain some accurate information concerning that OTHER WORLD which the instinct of mankind has so long predicted. . . . If we can reason so accurately, and with such wonderful confirmation of our reasoning, respecting so-called material objects and events . . . why may not our speculations penetrate as far into the immaterial starry system, of which the former is but the outward and visible type? . . . Menu, Zoroaster, Socrates, Christ, Shakespeare, Swedenborg,--these are some of our astronomers. (412)

The capitalization of the words "OTHER WORLD" indicates the stress Thoreau wanted this theme to receive. In fact, the capitalization of key words throughout the book is evidence of the thematic unity of A Week, for the third epigraph to the book contains the line "THOU seemest the only permanent shore," and at the end of "Monday" it had been revealed to Thoreau that "IT was well." "THOU," "IT," and the "OTHER WORLD" all point to Thoreau's faith in a supernatural reality. Again, though, this is not to suggest that Thoreau ignored this world and walked about gazing up at the heavens, for, firstly, this would go against his theory that this world is the means by which knowledge about the next is attained, and, secondly, he believed that the supernatural world coexisted with the natural one, and can therefore be participated in through a merging of the self with nature.

These passages on the afterlife, which take up many pages, are concluded with two translations from oriental literature. Whereas Thoreau had been offering only intimations about the afterlife, these quotations communicate the same ideas as fact:

"Yesterday, at dawn," says Hafiz, "God delivered me from all worldly affliction; and amidst the gloom of night presented me with the water of immortality."

In the life of Sadi by Dowlat Shah occurs this sentence: "The eagle of the immaterial soul of Shaikh Sadi shook from his plumage the dust of his body." (415)

He thereby ends his speculations with the semblance of biographical proof. The great number of these passages on the afterlife (and I have not included them all), indicates the emphasis Thoreau wanted to place on the theme, for although as he worked through successive versions of A Week he did omit certain anecdotes and essays which he felt duplicated the moral of other sections in the book,<sup>98</sup> these overabundant images and suggestions concerning the hereafter were left in.

Returning to the narrative, Thoreau writes, "Thus thoughtfully we were rowing homeward . . ." (415). That is, he assigns the thoughts that he had expressed on the immortality of man to both himself and his brother, thereby almost letting John speak for himself on the subject of his soul's fate. Thoreau then introduces a poem which reminds the reader that, on the spiritual level, the brother's almost being home corresponds to the end of the voyage of life-- that homeward is also heavenward. The final two stanzas read

<sup>98</sup> Hovde, Diss., pp. 209-10.

Ye gods of the shore,  
 Who abide evermore,  
 I see your far headland,  
 Stretching on either hand;

I hear the sweet evening sounds  
 From your undecaying grounds;  
 Cheat me no more with time,  
 Take me to your clime. (416)

The statement "I am bound, I am bound, for a distant shore," from the second epigraph with which Thoreau introduced A Week, is about to be fulfilled. Consequently, the final passages of narrative seem almost to be a description of rowing into heaven:

As it grew later in the afternoon, and we rowed leisurely up the gentle stream, shut in between fragrant and blooming banks, where we had first pitched our tent, and drew nearer to the fields where our lives had passed, we seemed to detect the hues of our native sky in the southwest horizon. The sun was just setting behind the edge of a wooded hill, so rich a sunset as would never have ended but for some reason unknown to men. . . . (416)

The scene is very blissful: whereas earlier in the chapter the emphasis had been on the autumn, and the associated death and decay, there is no mention of fall here--in fact, the banks are "blooming" and "fragrant," descriptions suggestive of his earlier statement on the "sweeter fragrances" that originate in the "Elysian fields" (407). It is as though the brothers are returning, after death, to a new Concord on a new earth: the fields are those where their lives "had passed," and the sunset seemed to be almost eternal.

Thoreau's faith that he and John would someday be together again is suggested in his description of two herons which were high in the heavens, flying with the same silence that marked the brothers' own departure from Concord in "Saturday." He writes that

the birds' destination was "surely not to alight in any marsh on the earth's surface, but, perchance, on the other side of our atmosphere, a symbol for the ages to study" (416). The sun soon after set, and the brothers continued rowing under the stars through the darkness, silently listening to the sound of their oars dipping monotonously into the water.

Not only the quiet rowing, but the extensive exposition on the hereafter that had just been completed, make these last pages of the book a suitable place for the digression on silence, which is the medium out of which everything comes and to which all returns. Thoreau writes that "the most excellent speech finally falls into Silence" (418). That is, all sounds and all words "are but bubbles on her surface, which straightway burst" (418). The digression is basically a sermon advocating humility, for the reason that man is nothing compared to the silence which was before and will be after words are spoken, books read, and lives led. Although only the first letter of "Silence" is capitalized, the word definitely refers to the same thing as "THOU," "IT," and the "OTHER WORLD." He says, "She is Truth's speaking-trumpet, the sole-oracle. . . . For through her all revelations have been made . . ." (419). Although revelations have come out of Silence, the soul's oracle, the Silence itself cannot be interpreted: "She cannot be done into English" (420). That is, all messages concerning an ultimate reality, a God or heaven, can only be suggestive, for the revelation is itself ineffable. The Silence can be experienced, but is too awesome to be described in words such as another might comprehend. This awareness

of the inexpressibility of the sacred is one reason why Thoreau was put off by the church, for it dogmatically asserted that it had translated the holy in a way that all men could understand. Also, Thoreau is admitting to the reader that all the foregoing expressions of his insights into the afterlife are far removed from the experience of the sacred itself. Each man must front "IT" himself.

While on one level "Silence" stands for ineffable Reality, with a small "s" it stands for death. Thoreau points out that the pursuit of Silence inevitably leads to silence:

A man may run on confidently for a time, thinking he has her under his thumb, and shall one day exhaust her, but he too must at last be silent, and men remark only how brave a beginning he made; for when he at length dives into her, so vast is the disproportion of the told to the untold that the former will seem but the bubble on the surface where he disappeared. Nevertheless, we will go on, like those Chinese cliff swallows, feathering our nest with the froth which may one day be bread of life to such as dwell by the seashore. (420)

Thoreau here admits his own inevitable end--his disappearance into the ocean of oblivion to which the stream of time flows. Thus he expresses his hope that his "bubble," or mark in time, may contribute to those who come after him, for all people live near the "seashore," that is, near death, and are therefore in need of the messages concerning life and death that have been left by others. In Thoreau's case the "froth" is his book, whose prophetic quality he suggests by comparing the froth to "bread of life"--of which Jesus said, "if any

man eat of this bread, he shall live forever."<sup>99</sup> Thoreau's hope that A Week would sustain men's faith in immortality is again made apparent.

"Friday" is the only day in A Week that does not end with a description of the brothers' preparing to sleep. Instead, they are left eternally awake at the end of the book. Furthermore, they have made it home: literally, they are back in Concord; symbolically, their voyage down the river of time and across death has taken them back to the place of their spiritual origin. In the epigraphs to the book, Thoreau had written "I am bound, I am bound, for a distant shore," and also, "THOU seemest the only permanent shore"; now, in the final sentence, he writes that he and John "leaped gladly on shore." Thus, A Week is structurally and thematically bound.

<sup>99</sup> John 6.51

## Chapter Three

Walden was dead and is alive again.  
--Thoreau, Walden

### I

Having been brought to an intense awareness of mortality by the deaths of John, Waldo Emerson, and Stearns Wheeler, Thoreau had expressed his views of the afterlife in his first book, ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> writing, <sup>of which</sup> was particularly motivated by his hope to be reunited with his brother, and which can be read as a metaphorical account of a voyage to a paradisaic hereafter. A Week is a successful book: both the discursive material and the structure of the journey reinforce the central theme of the soul's voyage. Had Thoreau written nothing else, it alone would be sufficient proof of his genius. Of course, though, he did produce other, and more important, works. Significantly, however, many of his best writings have the same theme or structure, or both, as A Week. In other words, A Week, with its theme of the search for everlasting life and its structure of the journey, is the prototype of Thoreau's writings. A brief consideration of some sections from Cape Cod, The Maine Woods, Walden, and "Walking," should make clear that an understanding of A Week provides insight into his other works.

One reason that Thoreau's concern with mortality and immortality did not end with his completion of A Week was that he continued to have encounters with death. Indeed, on June 14, 1849, only two weeks after A Week had been published, Thoreau's sister Helen, who was not quite five years older than he, died of tuberculosis.<sup>1</sup> She had been gradually weakening in the last years of her life, until, by the winter of 1848, it was obvious that she would soon die. In the month before her death Henry had arranged for a daguerreotypist to visit the Thoreau home and take a portrait of her.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he had recalled how thankful the Emersons were that his brother had had Waldo's portrait taken a few months before he had died. When Helen's funeral was held--in the family home--both the Trinitarian and the Unitarian ministers attended (a double<sup>1</sup> indemnity that parallels Henry's pursuit of both nature and God in order to insure himself of immortality.) Harding's paraphrase of a surviving account of the funeral indicates how much Henry was affected by his sister's death:

Thoreau sat seemingly unmoved with his family through the service, but as the pallbearers prepared to remove the bier, he arose and, taking a music box from the table, wound it and set it to playing a melody in a minor key that seemed to the listeners "like no earthly tune." All sat quietly until the music was over.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harding, Days, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Harding, Days, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Harding, Days, p. 258. Harding's source is Amanda Mather, Letter to Daniel Gregory Mason of September 13, 1897. MS, Raymond Adams.

According to Edward Emerson, Thoreau had also been comforted by the tunes of a music box "in the lonely days after John's death."<sup>4</sup> That is, in response to both deaths Thoreau could not directly express his grief; he therefore turned to such indirect means as the music box, and, more importantly, his writing. Helen was buried next to her brother John.<sup>5</sup>

The 1840's were obviously a somber decade for Thoreau. The loss in 1842 of John and of Waldo--who could almost be described as a son to Henry--was followed by the death of his friend Stearns Wheeler in 1843. At about the same time, Helen's poor health would have begun to show itself, and in the final years of the decade Henry would have seen her being slowly consumed. There is no question that in the years that Thoreau wrote his two most famous books death was the chief reality. As Perry Miller has noted in regard to the "consciousness" in Concord at that time, in such "simple village life . . . the supreme fact was death."<sup>6</sup>

The serious view of life that would result from such an environment appears in a letter Thoreau wrote, a few weeks after Helen's death, to ten-year-old Ellen Emerson, with whom he had become acquainted during his long stays at the Emerson household in the years 1841-1843 and 1847-1848. Although the letter is for the most part filled with anecdotes concerning Ellen's siblings

<sup>4</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Harding, Days, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Consciousness, p. 75.

Eddy and Edith, Thoreau's inner solemnness is particularly clear in a sentence in which he writes, "I suppose you think that persons who are as old as your father and myself are always thinking about very grave things, but I know that we are meditating the same old themes that we did when we were ten years old, only we go more gravely about it."<sup>7</sup> Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, he showed his concern with the "grave" throughout his writings. As he admits here, his themes did not change.

Thoreau's continuing concern with mortality is especially clear in the first chapter of Cape Cod, which relates an experience he had in the autumn following Helen's death. Although A Week contains a greater number of expressions of his belief in the hereafter, in this chapter entitled "The Shipwreck" his faith is more explicitly stated.

Accompanied by his friend Channing, Thoreau had embarked on his first excursion to Cape Cod. In Boston, they learned that a ship filled with Irish immigrants had wrecked only twenty miles south of the city. "Death! one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset," read a handbill they saw.<sup>8</sup> Since Cohasset was on the way to the Cape, he and Channing immediately set out. Richard Lebeaux has pointed out that Thoreau could not have avoided thinking

<sup>7</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, Vol. IV of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 5. All further references to this work appear in the text.

of the death of his brother,<sup>9</sup> for the ship was named the "St. John." Furthermore, once he arrived at the beach, he was accompanied by Ellen Sewall, whom he and John had both loved. She was then married, and lived in that vicinity with her husband.<sup>10</sup>

The scene was gruesome, yet Thoreau manages to describe it in a detached manner reminiscent of the unperturbed front he had initially tried to project after John's and Helen's deaths. Thus, he calmly describes the open coffins with the swollen and mangled bodies of children inside, the hundreds of curious onlookers milling about, a survivor enthusiastically telling the story of the wreck, and other unpleasant details. Although he maintains an unemotional tone, the scene must have caused all of his grief concerning John's death to well up again, for he asserts, "A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse" (11-12). Significantly, he uses the same response patterns to deal with these deaths as had characterized his coming to terms with the loss of his brother. His first reaction is to look to nature for an explanation: "If this was the law of Nature," he asks, "why waste any time in awe or pity?" (11). And then, in order to have a more positive justification of death, he denies that the people, as spiritual beings, are really dead. Whereas in A Week he usually had given his beliefs in the hereafter in a hypothetical form, here he treats the realm as fact:

<sup>9</sup> Lebeaux, pp. 199-200.

<sup>10</sup> Harding, Days, p. 270.

Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes. Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did; they were within a mile of its shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence--though it has not yet been discovered by science--than Columbus had of this. . . . I saw their empty hulks that came to land; but they themselves, meanwhile, were cast upon some shore yet further west, toward which we are all tending, and which we shall reach at last, it may be through storm and darkness, as they did. (12-13)

Here, then, Thoreau uses the same metaphor of the "shore" that he uses in the epigraphs to A Week--"I am bound, I am bound, for a distant shore," for instance. The belief in an afterlife seems to be consistent in Thoreau.

One critic, however--Professor Joel Porte--believes that passages such as the one above are examples of Thoreau's usual attitudes gone "awry."<sup>11</sup> He feels that Thoreau was so afraid of death--"breathless terror" is the phrase he uses--that, when he confronts it in his writing, "he often seems to lose control of his prose and to begin ranting in a painful fashion."<sup>12</sup> Believing that Thoreau was a materialist, he considers such passages as the result of temporary mental confusion; that is, the credibility of Thoreau's views on the afterlife is suspect because of the psycholo-

<sup>11</sup> Porte, Emerson and Thoreau, p. 184. Porte's applying this idea to the "Shipwreck" passage in particular was made to me in conversation after his lecture "'God himself culminates in the present moment': Thoughts on Thoreau's Faith," Thoreau Society annual meeting, Concord, Mass., 15 July 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Porte, Emerson and Thoreau, p. 184.

gical strain on him when he considered death. In opposition to this view, I would suggest that Thoreau's logical and coherent development of the extended metaphor of the soul's emigration to a "newer world" is itself proof that he was in control of himself when he expressed his beliefs in the afterlife, for he must have polished the passage many times when he was far removed from the actual scene. In fact, James McIntosh, who has devoted an entire chapter to "The Shipwreck" in his book Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist, sees it not as "ranting," but as "a shaped happening" purposely constructed by Thoreau to show the paths his mind takes when confronted by death.<sup>13</sup> And McIntosh is not the only critic who takes the "Shipwreck" passage as a reliable indication of Thoreau's view of death. Mary Elkins Moller, in her article on Thoreau's attitudes to death, notes how "firmly and attractively expressed" this faith in immortality is, and she reminds her reader that Thoreau wrote only what he believed.<sup>14</sup> This section of the "Shipwreck" therefore deserves further consideration.

Immediately after this passage on the "newer world" to which the drowned people emigrated, Thoreau reiterates this favourite metaphor of his--the sailor's voyage as a symbol of the passage the soul takes in death:

<sup>13</sup> James McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance toward Nature (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 216-35.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Elkins Moller, "'You Must First Have Lived': Thoreau and the Problem of Death," ESQ, 23 (1977), pp. 232-33.

The mariner who makes the safest port in heaven, perchance, seems to his friends on earth to be shipwrecked, for they deem Boston Harbor the better place; though perhaps, invisible to them, a skillful pilot comes to meet him, and the fairest and balmiest gales blow off that coast, his good ship makes the land in halcyon days, and he kisses the shore in rapture there, while his old hulk tosses in the surf here. (13)

As in the final chapter of A Week, where Thoreau again and again repeats his belief in the afterlife, here too he uses repetition to assert his strong faith. Thus, having already employed the metaphor of sailing into eternity twice in this section, he uses it a final time, by quoting from "verses addressed to Columbus dying." Of the six stanzas he includes, the first two are typical:

"Soon with them will all be over,  
 Soon the voyage will be begun  
 That shall bear them to discover,  
 Far away, a land unknown.

"Land that each, alone, must visit,  
 But no tidings bring to men;  
 For no sailor, once departed,  
 Ever hath returned again." (13)

It is only after Thoreau has three times reassured himself that the dead passengers of the "St. John" are not in a lamentable position, but are "in rapture," that he can continue with his narrative of the excursion to the Cape. Nevertheless, McIntosh notes that throughout the rest of the book, "We keep hearing a muffled dirge for the dead."<sup>15</sup> Cape Cod, then, especially the first chapter, has the same theme as does A Week.

<sup>15</sup> McIntosh, p. 223.

Whereas in Cape Cod the animating presence of John can be inferred from the comments Thoreau makes about the drowned people of the wreck, in The Maine Woods his continuing influence on Henry is even more apparent. "Ktaadn"--the first section of the book--is based on the first expedition Thoreau took to the Maine wilderness. There are a number of things that suggest the trip was motivated by Thoreau's attempting to draw closer to the spirit of his brother. The timing of the excursion is significant in this regard. A week long interlude in his two years at Walden Pond, he took the trip in the late summer of 1846, when he would have just finished the first draft of A Week and his head would have consequently been filled with memories of John. Thus, when he states in the first sentence of the book, "On the 31st of August, 1846, I left Concord . . . ,"<sup>16</sup> **it** is immediately clear that he is commemorating the voyage on the rivers that he took with John, for the first sentence of "Saturday" begins, "At length, on Saturday, the last day of August, 1839, we two, brothers, and natives of Concord, weighed anchor in this river port . . ." (12). Furthermore, the object of this trip to Maine was similar to the 1839 voyage, for whereas in that vacation the brothers had rowed up the Merrimack and then climbed the highest mountain in New Hampshire, in this voyage Thoreau again travelled up country and climbed a mountain, the highest in Maine. That he did

<sup>16</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, The Maine Woods, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 3. All further references to this work appear in the text.

have his brother in mind on this trip is revealed in his account of a song he and his companions sang one night as they paddled in moonlight across a lake. The refrain of the song goes, "'Row, brothers, row, the stream runs fast, / The Rapids are near and the daylight's past!'" (38). Thus was Henry's boating, like his writing, done in the memory of John.

Since Thoreau's concern for his brother is evident in the book, it is no surprise that the most famous incident concerning The Maine Woods involves a conjecture that Thoreau included concerning the hereafter. In 1858, James Russell Lowell, who was editing the Atlantic Monthly, published, in three installments, Thoreau's account of his 1853 excursion to Maine. When the second installment appeared, Thoreau immediately saw that Lowell had cut out a sentence without permission.<sup>17</sup> The sentence had been omitted because it described a pine tree in a religiously unorthodox way: "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still."<sup>18</sup> As Canby notes, "Thoreau boiled over,"<sup>19</sup> for he had specifically indicated in the proof sheets that that sentence, which some editor had marked for deletion, should be included.<sup>20</sup> Hence, Thoreau wrote an extremely vehement letter of protest

<sup>17</sup> Harding, Days, p. 393.

<sup>18</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 515. The sentence appears on page 122 of the Princeton Maine Woods.

<sup>19</sup> Canby, p. 374.

<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 515.

to Lowell. In it, he is not only concerned with the liberty that was taken with his work, but, also, he is provoked by the "bigoted & timid" mind that would find such a line offensive. He writes, "I could excuse a man who was afraid of an uplifted fist, but if one habitually manifests fear at the utterance of a sincere thought, I must think that his life is a kind of nightmare continued into broad daylight."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Thoreau is still arguing against that narrow-mindedness that acknowledges only the conventional idea of heaven, and that admits only those of one religion to it.

While Lowell must have considered the remark about the pine tree heretical, to Thoreau the idea that nature is as filled with God as is man, and would therefore be a part of the perfect realm, was an essential article of faith. Lowell never replied to the letter, and Thoreau did not submit anything else to the Atlantic until after Lowell had left the magazine.<sup>22</sup> Thoreau's conception of the hereafter was evidently as important to him in the late 1850's as it had been in the 1840's, when he wrote A Week. Like A Week and Cape Cod, The Maine Woods is more than a travelogue.

The "Canadian Boat Song," which Thoreau quotes from in "Ktaadn," and whose refrain has already been given above, was one of his favourite songs. When its lyrics are compared with those of another of his favourites--"Tom Bowline"--it becomes clear that he used both of them to express his feelings for his dead brother. Thus, they

<sup>21</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 516.

<sup>22</sup> Harding, Days, p. 394.

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are microcosms of the theme and purpose of many of his writings. The first stanza of the somber "Canadian Boat Song" reveals how suitably it would have served as a lament for John:

Faintly as tolls the evening chime,  
 Our voices keep tune and our oars keep time.  
 Soon as the woods on shore look dim,  
 We'll sing at St. Anne's our parting hymn.  
 Row, brothers, row, the stream runs fast,  
 The Rapids are near, and the daylight's past.<sup>23</sup>

In these few verses one finds all the major elements of A Week: the brothers, the stream of time, the nearness of the symbolic night, and the theme of separation suggested by the "parting hymn." It is no wonder that Edward Emerson, who could recall hearing Thoreau singing the song, writes that it "recalled the happy river-voyage."<sup>24</sup>

The metaphor of the soul as a sailing voyager, which Thoreau uses in A Week, is clear in "Tom Bowline," a song that Henry seems to have liked even more than the "Canadian Boat Song." The first and the third stanzas of it are as follows:

"Here a sheer hulk lies poor Tom Bowline,  
 The darling of our crew;  
 No more he'll he<sup>ar</sup> the tempest howling,  
 For death has broached him to.  
 His form was of the manliest beauty;  
 His heart was kind and soft;  
 Faithful, below, he did his duty,

<sup>23</sup> Helmut Kallmann, A History of Music in Canada, 1534-1914 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 35.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 88.

But now he's gone aloft.  
 . . . . .

"Yet shall poor Tom find pleasant weather  
 When He who all commands  
 Shall give, to call life's crew together,  
 The word to pipe all hands.  
 Thus death, who kings and tars dispatches,  
 In vain Tom's life had doffed;  
 For though his body's under hatches,  
 His soul is gone aloft!"<sup>25</sup>

Sanborn, in his first biography of Thoreau, where these stanzas are quoted, writes that this song "perhaps reminded him of his brother John."<sup>26</sup> In a later biography, he is more explicit on the subject, and states that he "never heard Henry speak of this brother except by the parable of this sea-song."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the song is much like a "parable"; the first stanza describes John perfectly, for he was the "darling," not only of the family, but of the community.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, like Tom (which is a near rhyme with "John"), he was kind-hearted.<sup>29</sup> The last stanza quoted above communicates the same hope for an afterlife as that expressed in "Brother where dost thou dwell?" and <sup>in</sup> A Week and elsewhere in his writings. There can be no doubt that Thoreau sang the song as a requiem for his brother, a

<sup>25</sup> F. B. Sanborn, Henry D. Thoreau, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), pp. 269-70

<sup>26</sup> Sanborn, Thoreau, p. 269.

<sup>27</sup> Sanborn, The Personality of Thoreau (1901; rpt. Folcroft, Pa.: The Folcroft Press, 1969), p. 39, quoted in Lebeaux, p. 198.

<sup>28</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 127.

fact that is further suggested by the emotion with which he sang it; a close personal friend of the Thoreaus, who was frequently a guest at their home, gives the following account of the family's singing this old sea-ballad:

Tears dim my eyes as those scenes arise before me; Sophia playing the old-time music, notably Scotch melodies, which so well suited her flexible voice, and those quaint ballads of a past generation, whose airs were often so plaintive and with so much of heartbreak in the words. All the family had rich, sweet voices. If the song was a favorite, the father would join in, and thrilling was their singing of that gem, "Tom Bowline." I hear now the refrain:

His soul has gone aloft.

Often Henry would suddenly cease singing and catch up his flute, and, musical as was his voice, yet it was a delight never to be forgotten to listen to the silvery tones that breathed from the instrument.<sup>30</sup>

That the flute Henry played had originally been John's would have served as one more link between the song and his brother.

More in keeping with his solitary nature, Thoreau also sang this song in more melancholy settings than the family parlour. In his journal entry for May 30, 1857, he describes his getting caught in a rainstorm while on one of his daily walks and consequently taking shelter under a protruding part of a cliff. He states, "I sang 'Tom Bowling' there in the midst of the rain, and the dampness seemed to be favorable to my voice. There was a slight rainbow on

<sup>30</sup> "Reminiscences of Thoreau," Outlook, 63 (December 2, 1899), 815-821; rpt. "'In Virtue of Noble Living,'" in Henry David Thoreau: A Profile, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), p. 69.

my way home" (J, IX, 393). The combination of lament and hope--the movement from the tomb-like cave in which he sang the elegy, out to the promise of a new world implied by the rainbow--typifies Thoreau's attitude toward his brother's death. In conclusion, both of Thoreau's favourite songs reveal the indirect approach that he used to express his grief and testify <sup>to</sup> his faith in a heaven; that is, they are models of his writings.

It is often forgotten that during his two years at the pond Thoreau wrote both the bulk of A Week and the first version of Walden.<sup>31</sup> In fact, some of the 1847 draft of A Week is written on the same blue paper used for the first draft of his more famous work.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in 1848, while he was working on a second draft of Walden, he was also revising A Week.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore inevitable that there be close connections between the two books. For instance, as already mentioned in the discussion of "Friday," there is the similarity of technique: whereas the first book compresses the experiences of two weeks into one, the second condenses two years into the cycles of one; moreover, the symbolism of the seasons is used in both--A Week shows Thoreau's recognition of mortality by the move from summer to fall, while Walden, by ending in spring, communicates his faith in immortality. Both are

<sup>31</sup> Harding, Days, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 155.

<sup>33</sup> Harding, Days, p. 330.

autobiographies, and in terms of the actual events described, Walden records a similar journey as does the first book, for in both Thoreau leaves the village, adventures on life, and then returns with new insights. This is the "out-and-back" movement which John C. Broderick notes serves as the structure for most of Thoreau's writing.<sup>34</sup> This pattern of departure and return itself reinforces the theme of rebirth in Walden, where the summer flees in the face of winter but then comes back with new life in the spring.

Hence, in addition to the similarity of structure between the two books, the theme found in A Week is also very much the theme of Walden. Sherman Paul's descriptions of Walden as "a fable of the renewal of life," and as "a book of metamorphoses,"<sup>35</sup> are true enough, but a more specific and accurate interpretation is William J. Wolf's statement that the book is a "gospel of an eternal life."<sup>36</sup> Inasmuch as this is true, Walden, like A Week, is concerned with explaining death. For example, in the famous passage in which Thoreau states that he went to the woods "to front only the essential facts of life," he explains his motivation as wanting to "be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion" (90-91). Most quotations of this passage leave off before this important rationale is given. In A Week, the facts that needed "fronting"

<sup>34</sup> John C. Broderick, "The Movement of Thoreau's Prose," American Literature, 33 (May 1961), p. 135.

<sup>35</sup> Paul, pp. 293, 294.

<sup>36</sup> Wolf, p. 143.

were defined as "IT" (324), and Thoreau used the tale of Hannah Dustan to illustrate that life is deadly serious. In the passage from "Where I Lived, And What I Lived For," the reason for this life's seriousness is given--the facts of this world have significance in the "next excursion." This explains why Thoreau sought to learn as much as he could about this life.

Not only did Thoreau want to be able to report on this life in the next, but he also wanted to experience eternity in the present, and to wake his neighbours up to its existence. In another famous passage from the second chapter of Walden, he reveals his desire both for knowledge of, and union with, eternal existence:

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. (98)

As Smith notes, Thoreau had had a taste of eternity at Walden (and, I would add, in A Week), and now he wanted to drink deep of it.<sup>37</sup> It is for this reason that in Walden he immerses himself in nature, for, as he stated in A Week, "he becomes immortal with her immortality" (404). One critic points out Thoreau's interest in bathing in natural bodies of water, and interprets it as "a species of purification rite" that was also done for the sake of "sheer physical pleasure."<sup>38</sup> It is also, though, an attempt at mystical

<sup>37</sup> Smith, Diss., p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Porte, Emerson and Thoreau, p. 155.

union with the eternal. In a journal account of bathing, he discloses the extent of his thirsting to be totally penetrated by spirit:

I bathe me in the river. I lie down where it is shallow, amid the weeds over its sandy bottom; but it seems shrunken and parched; I find it difficult to get wet through. I would fain be the channel of a mountain brook. I bathe, and in few hours I bathe again, not remembering that I was wetted before. (J, II, 335)

Accordingly, in his outline of how he spent his days at Walden, he writes, "I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did" (88).

Thoreau's associating himself with the eternalness of nature is further suggested by some of the descriptions of his hut, which he had built himself--as he and John had themselves built the boat they used on their river voyage. Like the boat, the cabin therefore stands for spiritual self-reliance. Significantly, it is described as though it were a part of Elysium: it is "fit to entertain a travelling god," and the "morning wind" that blows over it lasts "forever" (85). He states, "Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me" (87). Thoreau is establishing his proximity to eternity so that he may convince the reader that his insights into that realm, which are central to the final two chapters of the book, will be credible.

His role as a mediator between heaven and man--the role of the poet as a seer, which was developed in the "Friday" chapter of

A Week--is suggested in his description of Walden Pond, which symbolizes for him his own soul.<sup>39</sup> He writes, "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both" (176). The pond's colours are the same as those of the brothers' boat, which served as a symbol of man's duality in A Week.

In addition to his using his intimacy with nature to suggest his participation in eternity, Thoreau describes his familiarity with God, whom he describes metaphorically in the chapter on "Solitude":

I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity . . . and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried. (137)

In other words, he gets his information on immortality directly from the source. Further on in the book, in "The Ponds," he reiterates the close connection, introduced in the above passage, between Walden and God. In his account of how Walden came to be, he refers to that "ancient settler . . . who remembers so well when he first came here with his divining rod, saw a thin vapor rising from the sward, and the hazel pointed steadily downward, and he concluded to dig a well here" (182). In the same chapter, he

<sup>39</sup> Paul, p. 338.

establishes that the pond is itself a symbol of, if not a part of, the "new eternity" of which the "old settler" had informed him. Like the soul, the pond is "perennially young," remains "unchanged," and is a "vision of serenity and purity" (193). Thoreau notes that it has been called "God's Drop" (194). The most direct statement of what the pond represented to him is in the poem he includes in this section. Some of its lines are as follows:

I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven  
Than I live to Walden even.  
I am its stony shore,  
And the breeze that passes o'er. . . . (193)

By first identifying the pond with the Eternal, and then identifying himself with the pond, Thoreau thereby suggests that he is himself a part of "God and Heaven." (An interesting note here is that the word "Walden," meaning "the Wielder," was an Old English epithet for God.)<sup>40</sup> Sherman Paul has noted that "Walden was written in the awareness that eternity is purchased in time. . . ."<sup>41</sup> The lines quoted above clearly show that Thoreau made the transaction; in "Economy" he had himself stated that he had left the village for Walden in order to do business with the "Celestial Empire" (20).

"I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol," writes Thoreau in "The Pond in Winter" (287). He believed that man can learn from nature because it is filled with spirit.

<sup>40</sup> Klaus Ohlhoff, "A Meaning of the Word 'Walden,'" Thoreau Society Bulletin, No. 140 (Summer 1977), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Paul, p. 297.

Consequently, the seasons are also symbolic, and thus the book is structured around them. Frank MacShane notes, "The problem of death occupies the whole latter part of the book, and in these last chapters, Thoreau examines nature during its own apparent death--winter."<sup>42</sup> Four successive chapters are set in winter. In "House-Warming" Thoreau describes his own and nature's preparations for the coming cold and shows the season's arrival--first snow covered the ground and then the pond froze over. In the next three chapters he investigates the season and the pond; for instance, he mapped the pond and found its bottom, and he notes that there were still fish beneath the ice, and that the frozen water "remains sweet forever" (297). On a metaphorical level, he therefore finds out that the soul has this world as a natural bottom or foundation, and that, beneath apparent death, it remains alive.

The analogy between the pond and the soul of man is continued in "Spring." In his description of the booming of the ice which occurred every morning as the sun began to warm the day, Thoreau writes that the pond "stretched itself and yawned like a waking man." (301). Throughout the chapter he perceives the reawakening of nature as proof of the soul's rebirth. Moreover, nature is a higher authority on the subject of man's immortality than is scripture: "The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! . . . What at such a time are histories, chronologies, tradi-

<sup>42</sup> Frank MacShane, "Walden and Yoga," New England Quarterly, 37 (September 1964), 337.

tions, and all written revelation<sup>s</sup>?" (310). All of nature is a living parable: after describing the grass that he observed growing out of the last year's hay, he concludes, "So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity" (311).

Thoreau's ending Walden with a series of suggestions that the soul is immortal was motivated by the same concern for his dead brother that was behind the succession of similar statements that appear in the final chapter of A Week, which Frederick Garber has called "a rehearsal for the ending of Walden."<sup>43</sup> Thoreau's continuing worry about John is hidden in the statement with which he definitively summarizes the effect of spring on the pond, which he had earlier established as the soul: "Walden was dead and is alive again" (311). For the line has its origin in the New Testament account of the prodigal son--itself a parable of the soul's salvation. The father of the prodigal son, in his explanation of why there was rejoicing, says to the brother who remained at home, "this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost and is found."<sup>44</sup>

In the exultant tone of this chapter Thoreau captures the joy that a belief in immortality brings him. He describes the reborn world in a light-filled atmosphere that evokes heaven itself:

Ah! I have penetrated to those meadows on the morning

<sup>43</sup> Frederick Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> Luke 15.32

of many a first spring day, jumping from hummock to hummock, from willow root to willow root, when the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory, then? (317)

Again turning to the New Testament,<sup>45</sup> Thoreau in the above passage asserts that he gets the same message from nature as is written there--that the dead do not need waking because they are already awake. Such spring days, he decides, suggest the "universal innocence" of nature: "Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal" (318). Death has died.

In the last pages of Walden Thoreau uses two of his own parables to reiterate his faith in immortality. Perry Miller describes this conclusion as "a Yankee stratagem of intelligence" which Thoreau used to "elude death's cosmic conspiracy."<sup>46</sup> The one story is that of the artist from the city of Kouroo, who, by reason of his fashioning himself a perfect staff, was endowed with "perennial youth" (326). "Time kept out of his way" while he laboured, and when he finished, he saw his work miraculously transform itself into another world: "He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places" (326-27). Thoreau's hope, of course, was that his own

<sup>45</sup> 1 Cor. 15.55

<sup>46</sup> Miller, Consciousness in Concord, p. 79.

work of art--his writings and his life--would similarly metamorphose into something eternal.

The final story, on the last page of the book, describes such a metamorphosis. It concerns "a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years" (333). Thoreau notes that the egg must have been deposited in the living tree even earlier; now it had finally hatched and gnawed its way out--coming out of its coffin as it were. He asks, "Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this?" The final sentences of the book show that his own faith had been made stronger: "There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."

Thoreau's concern with the hereafter lasted to the end of his life. "Walking," one of the lectures he was revising for publication in the months before his death, and which was first published posthumously in the June 1862 Atlantic Monthly,<sup>47</sup> is proof of Thoreau's life-long unity of purpose--to remind his fellow man of his spiritual destination.

Because "Walking" deals with two distinct topics--walking itself, and "the Wild"--<sup>48</sup> it has often been criticized, like A

<sup>47</sup> Harding, Handbook, p. 70.

<sup>48</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in Excursions and Poems, Vol.V of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 224. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Week, for a supposed lack of thematic unity. Walter Harding calls it "the least organized of [Thoreau's] shorter works," and declares that the last pages are "a highly miscellaneous conglomeration of barely related paragraphs."<sup>49</sup> Frederick Garber, however, has shown that the essay has a definite unifying structure--namely, the westward journey toward the absolutely wild.<sup>50</sup> More particularly, the journey is toward the Absolute, for Thoreau says that, ideally, his walks take him to the "Holy Land" (205). "Walking" is therefore based on the same pattern as are A Week and Walden.

Thoreau begins the essay with a fanciful etymology of the word "sauntering," which he claims is derived from the Middle Ages, when a person who went "'à la Sainte Terre,'" or "to the Holy Land," became known as "a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander" (205). Those people who do not go to the Holy Land in their walks, he says, "are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense" (205). That the walk is a metaphor of the passage through life, and that Thoreau is therefore, as Charles Berryman has noted, the "prophet" who desires to teach man where he is journeying to, and how best to travel,<sup>51</sup> is indicated early in the essay. For example, <sup>Thoreau</sup> states that "every walk is a sort of crusade," and he lists the following prerequisites to walking, that is, to living

<sup>49</sup> Harding, Handbook, pp. 70-71.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick Garber, "Unity and Diversity in 'Walking,'" in New Approaches to Thoreau: A Symposium, ed. W. B. Stein (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1969), pp. 35-40.

<sup>51</sup> Berryman, p. 82, col. 2.

with full awareness of the destination which is life's end:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,--if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk. (206)

Ethel Seybold observes that these requirements are "biblical in source and religious in meaning."<sup>52</sup> The religious quality of the life Thoreau is recommending is further revealed in his elaborating that no wealth can purchase the readiness to walk: he says, "It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker" (207). Berryman has called this entire section Thoreau's manner of "announcing the true crusade to an audience of entrenched and complacent infidels."<sup>53</sup> As in Walden, then, his purpose is to wake his neighbours to a spiritual view of life and nature.

After having established walking as a metaphor of the journey through life, Thoreau goes on to show that wild "Nature"--the symbol of the holy--should be the walker's route. That is, unspoiled nature is the best path for those seeking eternity. This is the connection that justifies Thoreau's including the two topics of walking and wildness in this one essay. Hence, he writes that the nature he walks in is the same as that of "the old prophets and poets," and adds, in his poem on the unfrequented "Old Marlborough Road" that

<sup>52</sup> Seybold, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Berryman, p. 85, col. 1.

he often walked on alone,

It is a living way,  
As the Christians say.  
Not many there be  
Who enter there in. . . . (215)

For Thoreau, as for the Puritan, there was a wrong and a right way to live. He writes,

I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is not indifferent to us which way we walk. There is a right way; but we are very liable from heedlessness and stupidity to take the wrong one. (216)

The way that Thoreau feels drawn to, is, in addition to being the way of nature, a westward way--his ideal walk, he says, would take the shape of a parabola, "like one of those cometary orbits which have been thought to be non-returning curves, in this case opening westward, in which my house occupies the place of the sun" (217). Garber has shown how Thoreau's desire not to return from a walk was part of his wish to escape the cyclical world of time.<sup>54</sup> Near the beginning of the essay, Thoreau had revealed this desire to transcend time by complaining, "Our expeditions are but tours, and come round again at evening to the old hearth-side from which we set out. Half the walk is but retracing our steps. We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return. . ." (206). Rather than be stuck in this type of a circuit,

<sup>54</sup> Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination, p. 216.

he would break free, and have the cycles of his life flatten out into a "non-returning" curve. Garber calls this a "boundary-breaking" urge in Thoreau to expand the limits of the reality he knew,<sup>55</sup> and he notes that a similar path is described in the "Conclusion" of Walden, in the section where Thoreau writes,

Start now on that farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a worn-out China or Japan, but leads on direct a tangent to this sphere, summer and winter, day and night, sun down, moon down, and at last earth down too. (322)

Again this "farthest" pilgrimage is westward, that is, toward the same eternity that is represented in the sunset images at the end of A Week, and at the end of this essay as well.

In his articles on A Week, William Stein notes that in the Hindu sacred scriptures with which Thoreau was familiar, the "Sun Door" is "the entrance to the zone of transcendence,"<sup>56</sup> "the gate of heaven."<sup>57</sup> In "Walking," Thoreau states his attraction to this door to the other world: "Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down" (219). Using the same metaphor as in the first chapter of Cape Cod, he goes on to note that Columbus obeyed the westward tendency that he felt, and discovered "a New World" (220).

<sup>55</sup> Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination, p. 198.

<sup>56</sup> Stein, "Om," p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Stein, "Spoor," p. 22.

"Walking" concludes with a description of a "remarkable sunset" which Thoreau had experienced in a previous November. To communicate his seeing the death of the day as a symbol of a newer day, he paradoxically describes the setting sun's rays as "the softest, brightest morning sunlight," and states that it made a "paradise" of the meadow he was walking in (247). This begins a final rich glorification of nature, which, as Garber has pointed out, Thoreau began only after he had stated, "his desire for transcendence" over nature.<sup>58</sup> In other words, it was only because he was confident that he would ultimately overcome those natural cycles, which, although they are themselves bound to time, suggested transcendence of time to him, that he could exult in them. In the final paragraph the essay comes full circle, as Thoreau summons up that image of walking to the Holy Land with which he began. Garber discerningly notes, "The Holy Land emerges once more as a reminder of where he would like to go, but the circularity of the essay emblems Thoreau's unfinished state, where he has to be now."<sup>59</sup> Thus, although the essay, like A Week, and like Walden, has been cyclic, for at the end there is a return to the starting point, it is not a cycle of despair. Each outward movement results in a higher consciousness, in one more step up the ladder toward what Garber identifies in Thoreau as an awareness of "the possibility of a final rebirth into the

<sup>58</sup> Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination, p. 219.

<sup>59</sup> Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination, p. 220.

gloriously uncyclical."<sup>60</sup> The movement of Thoreau's life was that of an ascending spiral--each journey, whether literary or physical, revealing new insights of an eternal prize at the end. Accordingly, "Walking" finishes with the same suggestions of immortality that Thoreau gives in the final pages of A Week and Walden:

We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening.

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bankside in autumn. (247-48)

Ethel Seybold mentions the "sense of finality" in "Walking," and observes that these last sentences describe Thoreau's own approach to his impending death.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, "Walking" can be considered the final expression of his view of life and death. His spiritual vision is summed up in a definition of "higher knowledge" that he borrowed from a fellow seer and included toward the end of the essay: "a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy" (240).



<sup>60</sup> Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination, p. 204.

<sup>61</sup> Seybold, p. 88.

## II

First the death of John, and then the other deaths--Waldo, Stearns, Helen, and, in 1859, his father--<sup>62</sup> were the particular catalysts that brought about Thoreau's concern with mortality and his consequent hope for immortality. However personal in origin, the emphasis Thoreau placed on these themes was reinforced by his social environment--his family, his education, and particularly the intellectual milieu of New England Transcendentalism.

Thoreau's family was itself religious. His maternal grandfather was Rev. Asa Dunbar, a Harvard graduate, and a man of principle,<sup>63</sup> who Lebeaux feels was "the 'ideal' man" in Henry's mother's opinion.<sup>64</sup> In other words, although Dunbar had died before Thoreau was born, his mother might have often hinted to Henry that he should emulate him, and perhaps this is why he was sent to Harvard. Thus, Thoreau was brought up in a conventionally religious household: the family owned a pew in the First Parish Church,<sup>65</sup> Henry's mother was a member of the Bible Society, the children were christened, and Sundays were strictly enforced as a day to be spent quietly in the house.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, religion was a live issue in the house. In the 1820's, when the town's Congregational church split into Trinitarian and Unitarian

<sup>62</sup> Harding, Days, p. 408.

<sup>63</sup> Harding, Days, p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Lebeaux, p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> Harding, Days, p. 199.

<sup>66</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 9, 11, 20.

factions, Henry's mother, like three of his aunts, was actively involved.<sup>67</sup>

Having grown up in what was still basically a Puritan culture, it was inevitable that Thoreau would be concerned with the question of death and the afterlife. Several anecdotes <sup>about</sup> ~~concerning~~ his childhood show that, even when a young boy, he was anxious about heaven. One story is that Henry, "when he was three or four years old," was told that, like all other men, he must die. Having also been told about the glories of the hereafter, he later announced, as he came in from coasting, that he did not want to die and go to heaven because he would not be able to take his slide<sup>e</sup> to such a fine place, for "'the boys say it is not shod with iron, and not worth a cent.'"<sup>68</sup> Already he was reacting against the overly idealized view of that realm. Furthermore, having the awareness of death forced on him at such an early age would surely have left a lasting mark on his personality; in fact, Henry seemed to have remembered his initiation into that somber knowledge all his life. His sister Sophia states that, during his final illness a friend came to visit and--attempting to offer consolation to a man who had already resolved himself to his fate--said to him, "'Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go.'" Henry answered, "'When I was a very little boy I learned that I must die, and I set that down, so of course I am not disappointed now. Death

<sup>67</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 24-25.

<sup>68</sup> Sanborn, Thoreau, p. 49.

is as near to you as it is to me."<sup>69</sup>

Apparently, then, Thoreau was aware of death from very early childhood--he might even be described as precocious in that regard. When, later in his childhood, he brought his pet chickens to a tavern to sell, the tavernkeeper, wanting to promptly return the basket they were in, "wring their necks, one by one, before the boy's eyes, who wept inwardly, but did not budge."<sup>70</sup> This anticipates the stoicism that Thoreau attempted to display after John died.

Another story is that Henry's mother, often finding him still awake after having been put to bed in the trundlebed he shared with John, on one such occasion asked him why he did not sleep. "'Mother,' he replied, 'I have been looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them.'"<sup>71</sup> Robert Francis has noted that, on the trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Henry "still looked out at the stars and tried to pierce the mystery behind them, while his brother . . . slept untroubled at his side," and that, with his premature death, John had again, in a way, "dropped to sleep before half their talk was over, leaving Henry awake and alone."<sup>72</sup>

A general picture of the religious views of the Thoreau family is given by the same anonymous author who provides the intimate account of the family's singing "Tom Bowline." After recounting a

<sup>69</sup> Ricketson, Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, pp. 141-42, in Harding, Days, p. 464.

<sup>70</sup> Sanborn, Thoreau, p. 50.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Emerson, Notes on Thoreau, in Harding, Days, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Francis, pp. 49, 52.

walk taken with Sophia Thoreau to the old burying-ground in Concord, the author describes their sauntering back toward the house in which so many of the Thoreaus had died, and states that their thoughts turned naturally "to the problems of life and immortality."

The following summary is then given:

The religious belief of the family was, to state it briefly, the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Their confidence in the eternal beneficence and justice of their Creator could not be shaken, but for dogmas and sectarian creeds they had little respect, living and dying firm in the faith that He who observes every falling sparrow could not fail the human soul when tired of earth and hungry for immortality, it lays down its burden of flesh as it enters the eternal mansion prepared for it "from the foundation of the world."<sup>73</sup>

When this synopsis is juxtaposed with Thoreau's own statement of his religion, given in a March 27, 1848, letter to his friend H. G. O. Blake, the essential similarity of views is apparent:

I know that I am--I know that [ano]ther is who knows more than I who takes interest in me, whose creature and yet [whose] kindred, in one sense, am I. I know that the enterprise is worthy--I know that things work well. I have heard no bad news.<sup>74</sup>

Further on in this letter, he writes, "When you travel to the celestial city, carry no letter of introduction. When you knock ask to see God--none of the servants."<sup>75</sup> Like the rest of his

<sup>73</sup> "Reminiscences of Thoreau," in Harding, ed. Thoreau: A Profile, p. 72.

<sup>74</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 216.

<sup>75</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 216.

family's religion, then, Thoreau's was basically a form of Unitarianism: replacing formal doctrine, there is the sense of God as a loving creator, an optimism concerning life, and the perennial hope for immortality. As indicated by the final quotation, Thoreau's attitude is more self-reliant, for he has been affected by Transcendentalism; in general, however, he is approaching the same God as his family.

His education, like his upbringing, can also be described as religious. When Thoreau attended Harvard College--from 1833 to 1837--there were daily morning prayers in the chapel and required undergraduate courses in theology.<sup>76</sup> Harding notes that "the training was perhaps better for theology than for any other profession."<sup>77</sup> When he read on his own, in a twenty-one volume anthology of English poetry,<sup>78</sup> he discovered and quoted from such poems as Giles Fletcher's "Christ's Victory in Heaven," and "Christ's Triumph over Death."<sup>79</sup> Thus, he was exposed to religion on all sides.

In addition to his receiving almost theological training at Harvard, Thoreau was given further religious insight during his college years by Rev. Orestes Brownson, with whom he stayed for six weeks in the winter of 1836 while he taught school in Canton,

<sup>76</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 34-37

<sup>77</sup> Harding, Days, p. 34.

<sup>78</sup> Harding, Days, p. 38.

<sup>79</sup> Leisy, pp. 40-41.

Massachusetts.<sup>80</sup> (He had taken a leave of absence from Harvard in order to earn needed money for tuition.) Brownson was a main figure in the nascent Transcendentalism, and probably first introduced young Thoreau to the new views. On the first night of Henry's stay, the two talked until nearly midnight.<sup>81</sup> Henry called the stay "an era in my life--the morning of a new Lebenstag."<sup>82</sup> And Harding writes that "Brownson's influence on Thoreau at this formative moment in his career has generally been overlooked."<sup>83</sup> The very religious brand of Transcendentalism that Thoreau would have been exposed to is typified by the following passage from Brownson's article on Victor Cousin, which was published later in the same year that Henry had stayed with him: "Well may we study nature, for, as a whole and in the minutest of its parts, it is a manifestation of the Infinite, the Absolute, the Everlasting, the Perfect, the universal Reason,--God."<sup>84</sup> This idea of Brownson's that nature should be studied not for philosophical, but for spiritual insight, is, of course, the same that Thoreau later expressed in his writings. The religious education that had been

<sup>80</sup> Harding, Days, p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> Harding, Days, p. 45.

<sup>82</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Harding, Days, p. 46.

<sup>84</sup> Orestes A Brownson, "Victor Cousin," The Christian Examiner, 21 (September 1836), 33-64; rpt. in The Transcendentalists: An Anthology, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 112.

begun in his family and continued at Harvard was thus completed-- and turned to a somewhat radical form--by Brownson; Thoreau was therefore ready for confirmation into full Transcendentalist brotherhood.

It was in the fall of 1837, that Thoreau, recently graduated from Harvard, began to attend the Transcendentalists' meetings.<sup>85</sup> As Perry Miller points out, because Thoreau was younger than most of the Transcendentalists, he was therefore "molded by the concepts and theories" of the movement.<sup>86</sup> The roster of those who frequently attended the informal meetings suggests what type of ideas these would be, for the list contains mostly Unitarian ministers or former ministers: "Emerson, Rev. Frederick Henry Hedge, Rev. George Ripley, Rev. Orestes Brownson, Rev. Jones Very, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott, Rev. Theodore Parker, Christopher Pearce Cranch, Rev. John Sullivan Dwight."<sup>87</sup> Not only were most of them ministers by name, but, more importantly, they had all, notes H. C. Goddard, "had what they deemed a spiritual revelation, and all felt called on to preach it to the world."<sup>88</sup> That is, they were truly preachers, and Transcendentalism was their gospel.<sup>89</sup> In such a

<sup>85</sup> Harding, Days, p. 63.

<sup>86</sup> Perry Miller, ed., The Transcendentalists: An Anthology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Harding, Days, p. 63.

<sup>88</sup> Harold Clarke Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism (1908; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1969), p. 141.

<sup>89</sup> Goddard, p. 191.

milieu, so vigorous that it might be more accurately termed a melee, did Henry Thoreau, only twenty years old, find himself. Moreover, his own mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was the leader of the group. Thus, Thoreau was greatly swayed.

Although Transcendentalism is probably studied more by literary critics than by theologians, Perry Miller notes that the movement "is most accurately to be defined as a religious demonstration."<sup>90</sup> Boller reiterates this in his statement, "The Transcendental revolt began in religion, and though it soon moved into other realms of life it remained essentially religious in its quest for meaning and purpose."<sup>91</sup> This is not to say that it should not be studied as a literary phenomenon, for what the Transcendentalists did was to put their religion into the language of literature rather than theology. Nevertheless, Emerson, Thoreau, and some of the others, did consider themselves as prophets more than as artists.<sup>92</sup> Goddard sums up their self-conceived role as follows: "To be to unawakened earth the trumpet of a prophecy. . . ."<sup>93</sup> Thoreau himself believed that his purpose was to be a spokesman for God. One of his poems reads:

Ive searched my faculties around

<sup>90</sup> Miller, Transcendentalists, p. 8.

<sup>91</sup> Boller, p. 205.

<sup>92</sup> Berryman, pp. 81-86. Also, Paul Lauter, "Thoreau's Prophetic Testimony," in Thoreau in Our Season, ed. John Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962), pp. 80-90.

<sup>93</sup> Goddard, p. 198.

To learn why life to me was lent  
 I will attend his faintest sound  
 And then declare to man what God hath meant<sup>94</sup>

It is not surprising that one of Joseph Wood Krutch's conclusions about A Week is that Thoreau wanted to show in it that "he too was among the prophets."<sup>95</sup>

The central message of Transcendentalism is given in Emerson's statement that "Nature is the symbol of spirit."<sup>96</sup> All of nature is seen as being a part of God, and man's purpose, as Theodore Parker says, is to "get as near as possible to a life perfectly divine,"<sup>97</sup> that is, to go to nature to become spiritually whole. "Heaven has come down to earth, or, rather, earth has become heaven,"<sup>98</sup> is another restatement of the Transcendentalists' world view. Although the movement had other messages--epistemological, ethical, literary, educational, social, and so on--it was its religious theories that particularly influenced Thoreau. This is evident in how closely the above quotations <sup>parallel</sup> ~~imitate~~ his own expressions, which came later.

Inasmuch as Thoreau's religion can be traced to Transcendentalism, so can his attention to the question of immortality, for

<sup>94</sup> Thoreau, Collected Poems, p. 195.

<sup>95</sup> Krutch, p. 96.

<sup>96</sup> Emerson, "Nature," p. 17.

<sup>97</sup> Theodore Parker, "A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," in The Transcendentalists, ed. Miller, p. 277.

<sup>98</sup> Parker, "Discourse," p. 275.

he was not the only Transcendentalist interested in the subject. Theodore Parker, who had been raised by parents with liberal religious beliefs, was shocked when, as a young boy, he found a copy of the Westminster Catechism and read the doctrine of eternal damnation in it. He overcame his terror, however, and for the rest of his life grew in the conviction that God's goodness would be total in the next world. His eventual conclusion on immortality is given in a letter of May 5, 1848: "I have no more doubt of my eternal life--eternally conscious, eternally progressive, than of my present and mortal condition. . . . I cannot doubt that I shall see and know my friends in heaven."<sup>99</sup> Likewise, Margaret Fuller writes, "I am thinking now,--really thinking. . . . Never was my mind so active; and the subjects are God, the universe, immortality."<sup>100</sup> And two months before her fateful voyage back to America, she wrote, "'In case of mishap, however, I shall perish with my husband and my child, and we may be transferred to some happier state. . . . God will transplant the root, if he will to rear it into fruit-bearing. . . .'"<sup>101</sup> Emerson has his essay "Immortality" on the subject. And, as already mentioned, Thoreau records that Bronson Alcott one day defined heaven as "'A place where you can have a little con-

<sup>99</sup> Theodore Parker, in John Weiss, Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, 2 vols. (1864; rpt. New York: Bergman Publishers, 1969), I, 30-31, II, 451-52.

<sup>100</sup> Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller, ed. R. W. Emerson, W. H. Channing, and J. F. Clarke, 2 vols. (1884; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), I, 126.

<sup>101</sup> Fuller Ossoli, Memoirs, II, 337.

versation'" (J, XIII, 94). Both because of this implicit support of his own delving into the subject, and because he had had his hopes confirmed by his own insights and experiences, Thoreau was sure that the other world was worth investigating. Thus, he incorporated the theme into his writings, for he wanted to awaken his readers in the same way he had been awoken by Transcendentalism. This desire is revealed in a letter of December 22, 1853, to his friend Blake: "You said that you were writing on Immortality. I wish you would communicate to me what you know about that. You are sure to live while that is your theme."<sup>102</sup>

The particular conceptions of the afterlife that Thoreau held were both the result of his being influenced by, and reacting against, his religious heritage. Although for him New England Calvinism was too dogmatic and pessimistic, Unitarianism too rational, and Emersonian Transcendentalism too ambiguous, they all had strong effects on him.

His rejection of the established church was itself Puritan, for Puritanism was historically centered "in the urge to reform the institutional manifestations of Christianity."<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, Thoreau's conception of life as a purposeful pilgrimage toward a spiritual realm is also Puritan, as are such assumptions of his as man's dependence on God the creator--"the Artist who made the world

<sup>102</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 313.

<sup>103</sup> Oliver, p. 80.

and me" (Walden, 306). His belief in the afterlife also has orthodox origins, with the significant difference being that Thoreau "was completely free from medieval demonology and early Christian ideas of pre-existent powers of cosmic evil."<sup>104</sup> There is no dark place of punishment, no Hell filled with devils and sinners, in his view of the hereafter. Like Theodore Parker, who cried out against the doctrines of man's depravity and of everlasting damnation,<sup>105</sup> Thoreau also reacted against the morbid half of the Christian eschatology.

A brief look at his principle of selecting lines of poetry for quotation in A Week reveals how he strove to keep his view of the afterlife untainted by the Christian. For example, in the vision of heaven recounted in the Saddle-back episode, Thoreau uses a quotation from Giles Fletcher's "Christ's Victory in Heaven." Thoreau writes,

As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive  
days' journeys I might reach the region of eternal day,  
beyond the tapering shadow of the earth; ay,--

"Heaven itself shall slide,  
And roll away like melting stars that glide  
Along their oily threads." (198)

As noted by Carl Hovde, these lines in their original context are part of a stanza in which Fletcher lists the ways in which a man might, on doomsday, try to hide himself:

<sup>104</sup> Smith, p. 265.

<sup>105</sup> Goddard, p. 83.

The sea to drink him quick? that casts his dead;  
 Angels to spare? they punish: night to hide?  
 The world shall burn in light: the Heav'ns to spread  
 Their wings to save him. Heav'n itself shall slide,  
 And roll away like melting stars that glide  
 Along their oily threads; his mind pursues him. . . .<sup>106</sup>

That is, an image used in the original poem to evoke the idea of terror is used in A Week to express joy. Although both authors believe that a spiritual realm will eventually manifest itself, Thoreau's picture is anithetical to Fletcher's Christian view.

Thoreau's replacing Fletcher's pessimistic outlook with his own optimism is typical of the Unitarian and Transcendentalist reaction to the Calvinistic emphasis on sin and punishment. In addition to doing away with hell, the Unitarianism from which Transcendentalism evolved asserted "the potentiality of all people to achieve salvation through their own efforts."<sup>107</sup> That is, the idea of universal salvation, which is implied throughout Thoreau's pictures of the afterlife, is the product of his exposure to the newest denomination of his day. Thoreau himself gave an autographed copy of A Week to the Universalist minister in Concord.<sup>108</sup>

Thoreau's conception of heaven, therefore, inasmuch as it is a picture of a definite place after death, is based on the Christian view, but because Heaven implies Hell, he takes pains not to

<sup>106</sup> Carl Frederick Hovde, "Literary Materials in Thoreau's A Week," PMLA, 80 (March 1965), 78.

<sup>107</sup> Boller, p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> Harding, Days, p. 322.

admit the conventional basis of his paradise. Thus, in the quotation, included in "Friday,"

"There is a place beyond that flaming hill,  
From whence the stars their thin appearance shed,  
A place beyond all place, where never ill,  
Nor impure thought was ever harbored." (403)

which is also from "Christ's Victory in Heaven," Thoreau is careful not to include the four lines which immediately follow those he has quoted, for they provide a definite Christian context.<sup>109</sup>

That the afterlife Thoreau anticipated is Christian, suggests that he never fully assimilated the oriental philosophies that he sometimes read, and that some critics have put great emphasis on.<sup>110</sup> Although he was broad-minded enough to play occasionally with the idea of metempsychosis, he usually uses it for rhetorical purposes, and not as an expression of faith.<sup>111</sup> It is because he did not believe that man would be reincarnated again and again, but rather, that he has only one chance at this life, that Thoreau stressed the importance of every moment. The lines he quotes in "Friday" represents his own view of life: "Thy sun posts westward, passed is thy morn, / And twice it is not given thee to be born;" (417). And Thoreau suggests the same idea of the once-and-for-all character of life when he writes in Walden, "As if you could kill

<sup>109</sup> Hovde, Diss., p. 75.

<sup>110</sup> Harding, Handbook, p. 125, provides a partial list of studies of Thoreau's relation to the Orient.

<sup>111</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, pp. 124, 258, for example.

time without injuring eternity" (8).

An area in which he did follow the example set by the Oriental scriptures was that of religious self-reliance. In the Hindu scriptures that Thoreau had read, W. B. Stein says, "No preceptor vaunts his scheme of salvation. He merely tells his pupil how he arrived at his conclusions, and then leaves the seeker to find his own path."<sup>112</sup> This view harmonized with the Transcendentalists' replacing faith in external authorities such as creeds and the Bible, with a system in which each individual depends on his own intuition and his own apprehension of the correspondences between the natural and the spiritual world to show him the way to enlightenment.

Encouraged to be self-reliant, Thoreau's conclusions about the afterlife were ultimately distinct from Emerson's in the important question of personal immortality. Whereas Emerson had postulated that "everything connected with our personality fails,"<sup>113</sup> Raymond Adams points out that in Thoreau's opinion the soul does not lose its identity after death.<sup>114</sup> This belief is the basis of Thoreau's poem "Brother where dost thou dwell?" and his first epigraph to A Week, for example. More concerned about the self than even Emerson, and not wishing to anticipate being absorbed into an amorphous Over-Soul after death, Thoreau wanted to maintain his individuality into eternity. He wanted to see John again, and he himself wanted to continue to

<sup>112</sup> Stein, "Spoor," p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," pp. 342-43.

<sup>114</sup> Adams, p. 60.

be. Thus, he once cryptically wrote, "As for missing friends,-- what if we do miss one another? have we not agreed on a rendezvous?"<sup>115</sup>

Although Thoreau presumed that all humankind would be saved, and that there would be no place of punishment in the hereafter, he did hold that there would be some sort of a judgement. Moral as he was, he realized that every ethical system would fall into subjectivism if a final absolute authority were not postulated. In a letter of December 19, 1854, to H. G. O. Blake, he expresses his belief that death will bring judgement and that a realization of this must determine one's behaviour in life:

I just put another stick into my stove,--a pretty large mass of white oak. How many men will do enough this cold winter to pay for the fuel that will be required to warm them? I suppose I have burned up a pretty good-sized tree to-night,--and for what? . . . At last, one will say, "Let us see, how much wood did you burn, sir?" And I shall shudder to think that the next question will be, "What did you do while you were warm?" Do we think the ashes will pay for it? that God is an ash-man? It is a fact that we have got to render an account for the deeds done in the body.<sup>116</sup>

The above passage shows why Thoreau took life so seriously: in addition to there being only one chance at living in this world, he held the Puritan belief that every moment must inevitably be accounted for, and that therefore every action must be purposeful. This world view gives religious significance to even the smallest details of life. Thus, it is his conception of the next world which

<sup>115</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 266.

<sup>116</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 355.

gives meaning to this world for him. In an earlier part of this letter he had written, "We have got to know what both life and death are, before we can begin to live after our own fashion."<sup>117</sup>

In spite of the fact that the Christian idea of heaven, and even of judgement, underlies Thoreau's view of the afterlife, he could never be a Christian himself. Even those churches that had done away with the doctrines of innate depravity, and hell and damnation, were unacceptable to Thoreau, for he thought that all the Christian institutions of his time were profane. If what his neighbours did was Christian, then he would prefer not to be one. He once wrote his sister Sophia about the "idiotic" Concordians whose superstition made them fascinated by spirit "knockings," which were apparently the latest rage in the town:

Most people here believe in a spiritual world which no respectable junk bottle which had not met with a slip-- would condescend to contain even a portion of for a moment. . . . If I could be brought to believe in the things which they believe--I should make haste to get rid of my certificate of stock in this & the next world's enterprises, and buy a share in the first Immediate Annihilation Company that offered--I would exchange my immortality for a glass of small beer this hot weather. Where are the heathen? Was there ever any superstition before? And yet I suppose there may be a vessel this very moment setting sail from the coast of North America to that of Africa with a missionary on board! Consider the dawn & the sun rise--the rain bow & the evening,--the words of Christ & the aspirations of all the saints! Hear music? See--smell--taste--feel--hear--anything--& then hear these idiots inspired by the cracking of a restless board--humbly asking "Please spirit, if you cannot answer by knocks, answer by tips of the table."!!!!!!<sup>118</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 354.

<sup>118</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 284.

In addition to not wanting to associate himself with such a mentality, another reason Thoreau did not join any church was that he delighted in his independence--a personal God might have been "a threat to his integrity."<sup>119</sup> Thus, as both Johathan Bishop and Joel Porte have noted, Thoreau inhibits himself from fully experiencing the religious visions he is offered.<sup>120</sup> On top of Mt. Greylock, for example, he was "shown" a vision of paradise (A Week, 198); he makes no attempt, however, to penetrate through the show to whatever was doing the showing. One final reason Thoreau was not inclined to seek extra assurance concerning immortality by turning to organized religion was that he believed that the sacred could only be experienced by the solitary individual, and that religious experience is difficult to communicate with others. Thus, each person must base his religion on his own encounters with the world; consequently, <sup>Thoreau's</sup> ~~his~~ own views on the hereafter are set in his autobiographical writings, where their personal sources are discernible.

It is because Thoreau personally went to nature to find out about God and the afterlife that his concept of heaven was so sensuous. In the midst of the afterlife images in "Friday," he writes: "We can conceive of nothing more fair than something which we have experienced" (406). For this reason, and also because he was psychologically inclined to prefer the sensuous to the abstract

<sup>119</sup> Bishop, p. 88.

<sup>120</sup> Bishop, p. 82. Porte, Emerson and Thoreau, p. 168.

(that nature was ultimately more beautiful to him than ideas is an essential difference between him and Emerson), Thoreau, as Raymond Adams notes, "made his heaven the perfected image of his world--Nature."<sup>121</sup> He was deeply in love with this realm: Emerson says that Thoreau once stated, "'I think nothing is to be hoped from you, if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you to eat than any other in this world, or in any world.'"<sup>122</sup>

His stressing the importance of the material world, not only in this life, but in that to come, shows the influence of his Transcendentalist acquaintances. In reaction to the denigration of this world by Christians who expected a totally better afterlife, certain Transcendentalists, in an attempt to retrieve a holistic conception of reality, saw the world as a place where spirit and matter were fused. Perry Miller points out that a main point of George Ripley's Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion (1836), is that, "when nature is seen as a divine language," the distinction between the divine and the natural "ceases to mean anything at all."<sup>123</sup> In that pamphlet, Ripley states that, for the religious man, the visible world "is of great importance," for it is "the expression of an Invisible Wisdom and Power."<sup>124</sup> That Thoreau

<sup>121</sup> Adams, p. 65.

<sup>122</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," in Lectures and Biographical Sketches (1904; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 469.

<sup>123</sup> Miller, Transcendentalists, p. 132.

<sup>124</sup> George Ripley, Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion, in The Transcendentalists, ed. Miller, pp. 134-35.

absorbed this philosophy of the identity between spirit and matter, man and nature, is evident in his statement, "Methinks my own soul must be a bright invisible green" (A Week, 250).

If the soul were a part of nature before death, then it follows that it would continue to be so afterwards. This conception of Thoreau's was developed primarily after the death of his brother, and appears in the elegy "Brother where dost thou dwell?" which he sent to his sister in May of 1843. In a journal entry for August of that year (a year not included in the 1906 edition of the Journal), he expands on the life that he anticipates in heaven:

The future will no doubt be a more natural life than this. We shall be acquainted and shall use flowers and stars, and sun and moon, and occupy this nature which now stands over and around us. We shall reach up to the stars and planets fruit from many parts of the universe. We shall purely use the earth and not abuse it--God's in the breeze and whispering leaves and we shall then hear him. We live in the midst of all the beauty and grandeur that was ever described or conceived. We have hardly entered the vestibule of nature. It was here, be assured, under these heavens that the gods intended our immortal life should pass--these stars were set to adorn and light it--these flowers to carpet it.<sup>125</sup>

In arriving at this vision of an earth-like heaven, Thoreau was perhaps swayed by Emerson, for one of the various concepts of the afterlife that <sup>Emerson</sup> held was based on the writings of Swedenborg, who had described a hereafter that is basically a continuation of

<sup>125</sup> Thoreau, journal entry dated 26 August 1843, MS, George S. Hellman, in Adams, p. 65.

the present existence.<sup>126</sup> Emerson summarizes the Swedish mystic's idea as "All nature will accompany us there."<sup>127</sup> Although in his lecture, "Swedenborg; or, The Mystic," he reacts against the detail of Swedenborg's revelations of the other world, Emerson's own views are quite the same, only more general:

The secret of heaven is kept from age to age. No imprudent, no sociable angel ever dropt an early syllable to answer the longings of saints, the fears of mortals. . . . But it is certain that it must tally with what is best in nature. It must not be inferior in tone to the already known works of the artist who sculptures the globes of the firmament and writes the moral law. It must be fresher than rainbows, stabler than mountains, agreeing with flowers, with tides and the rising and setting of autumnal stars.<sup>128</sup>

Despite Emerson's giving heaven a natural setting here, he avoids the more important question of man's position in that realm. If Thoreau's statement that "We shall be acquainted and shall use flowers and stars, and sun and moon" is tacked on to this passage from Emerson, it does not jar, but logically follows. Thus, even though Thoreau's view of the afterlife may have been influenced by Emerson's, Thoreau made surer that man, in his intellectual and physical totality, is assigned a place in it.

Also distinguishing him from Emerson is Thoreau's unwilling-

<sup>126</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," p. 327.

<sup>127</sup> Emerson, "Immortality," p. 327.

<sup>128</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, The Mystic," in Representative Men (1903; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), pp. 140-41.

ness to postpone eternity until after death. For him, this life is a part of heaven; man can therefore be no nobler in the existence after death than he is in his life. He writes in his journal, "With most men life is postponed to some trivial business, and so therefore is heaven. Men think foolishly they may abuse and misspend life as they please and when they get to heaven turn over a new leaf" (J, II, 328). In "Friday," he theorizes that if the senses were pure enough to enable one to fully experience nature, then a taste of heaven could be had here and now. (His message is similar to that in Emily Dickinson's lines, "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last-- / I'm going, all along.") William Wolf, in his study of Thoreau's religion, notes that the rejection of the traditional division between this world and the next is Thoreau's particular theological emphasis.<sup>129</sup> Thus, in A Week, Thoreau complains of Jesus that "he taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world" (74). Rather than deferment, Thoreau wanted to have "instant life" (J, III, 263). He therefore showed with his own life that the temporal participated in the eternal, that the immortal life of the gods could be had now. This idea that eternity, and therefore God, is as present in this world as in the next is given full expression in the second chapter of Walden:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system,

<sup>129</sup> Wolf, p. 140.

behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us. (96-97)

That was the world where he lived, and what he lived for. God and eternity are not only ascertained, but are experienced by the man who lives wholly in nature. "We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life" (A Week, 408). Everlasting life must be discovered in and through nature before it can be confirmed as an attribute of the soul. After a walk to Walden in March of 1856, on a day when the sun was warming and the snow melting, Thoreau wrote in his journal, "The eternity which I detect in Nature I predicate of myself also" (J, VIII, 222). For this reason, then, must man be "naturalized" before he can be "spiritualized" (A Week, 405). And this is why Thoreau takes the reader with him on the vacation on the rivers, the two year stay at Walden, and the many walks and excursions described in his writings. He wishes to share his spiritual vision with others who are on the same journey through life. In a section of The Maine Woods that describes his and his Indian guide's paddling toward the western shore of a lake, Thoreau writes, "I told him that in this voyage I would tell him all I knew, and he should tell me all he knew, to which he readily agreed" (168).

Because he did not believe that societal forms of religion

were a credible means of finding insight into the afterlife, Thoreau took the Transcendentalist path of nature. He was not exaggerating when he said that "a snow-storm was more to him than Christ."<sup>130</sup> For he had taken to heart Emerson's statement that "the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God."<sup>131</sup> That he went to nature, not for reasons of natural science, but for natural religion, is stated by Thoreau himself; furthermore, it is attested to by both those who knew him personally and those who know him only through his writings.

Thoreau's belief that faith must result from a direct experience of nature is stated in a letter of October, 1841, to Isaiah Williams, the young man who was seeking spiritual guidance from the Transcendentalists. Thoreau writes, "The <sup>r</sup>stains of a more <sub>^</sub>heroic faith vibrate through the week days and the fields than through the Sabbath and the Church. To shut the ears to the immediate voice of God, and prefer to know him by report will be the only sin."<sup>132</sup> Desiring his own revelations, he therefore searched through the countryside, boated up rivers, and climbed mountains. As he notes in "Walking," he spent at least four hours a day, and often more than that, in pursuit of the spirit that he felt in nature (207). He describes his quest in the first chapter of Walden,

<sup>130</sup> John Weiss, "Thoreau," Christian Examiner, 79 (July 1865), 96-117; rpt. in Pertaining to Thoreau, ed. S. A. Jones (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 46, col. 2.

<sup>131</sup> Emerson, "Nature," p. 37.

<sup>132</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 52.

where he mentions, "So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express!" (17). He recorded what he heard in his journal, and eventually withdrew the best communications for inclusion in his books. He thought writing important as a means of recording the most inspiring experiences of his life (J, III, 217). As already mentioned, the Transcendentalists thought of themselves not as writers, but as prophets; accordingly, Thoreau perceived his own vocation to be religious: "My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature" (J, II, 472). This searching shows that Thoreau was not a pantheist, for the pantheist considers nature and God identical--a belief that would do away with the need for searching. Thoreau's God is the creator who is behind nature; therefore it takes some insight to find him, and one must know how to approach the world if he is to be successful in the quest. Thus, Thoreau gives such suggestions as the following: "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her" (J, V, 45). And because nature only hints about God, Thoreau followed suit, and often wrote and spoke indirectly about the central search of his life.

Thoreau's indirect expression often hides his religious quest from the reader. In his eulogy for Thoreau, Emerson mentions his friend's "unwillingness to express to profane eyes what was still sacred in his own," and adds that he "knew well how to throw a

poetic veil over his experience."<sup>133</sup> His characteristic habit of using metaphor, even in speech, to suggest his true concerns is revealed in the account Emerson gives of a conversation he once had with Thoreau while on a walk in the fields:

Presently he heard a note which he called that of the night-warbler, a bird he had never identified, had been in search of twelve years, which always, when he saw it, was in the act of diving down into a tree or bush, and which it was vain to seek; the only bird which sings indifferently by night and by day. I told him he must beware of finding and booking it, lest life should have nothing more to show him. He said, "What you seek in vain for, half your life, one day you come full upon, all the family at dinner. You seek it like a dream, and as soon as you find it you become its prey."<sup>134</sup>

Emerson does not offer any interpretation of this anecdote, but does confess, "His riddles were worth the reading. . . ."<sup>135</sup> Most probably though, the story is about Thoreau's search for the spiritual world, for the bird is, after all, a traditional symbol of spirit. Thoreau had himself written, in "Brother where dost thou dwell?," "What bird wilt thou employ / To bring me word of thee?" In addition, the bird is like spirit in that it has never been definitely identified--it is always diving into a tree or bush, that is, hiding itself behind nature. The warbler is another form of Thoreau's lost turtle-dove, which, reports Thoreau in Walden,

<sup>133</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 476.

<sup>134</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," pp. 470-71.

<sup>135</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 476.

some travellers had seen "disappear behind a cloud" (17). Moreover, it sings the same night and day--an expression of Thoreau's belief that revelation can be had in all times and places. Thus, he had been searching for this bird for "half his life"--since John died perhaps. Here is the reason for those countless walks, which lasted "every day about half the daylight," even in bitter January (J, IX, 208). He sometimes even went out in the night for long walks in which he might experience nature by moonlight (J, IV, 144-47). This parable of the night-warbler leads one to the same conclusion concerning Thoreau as that to which Ethel Seybold comes: "The truth, the quite incredible truth about Thoreau, the truth that we resist in spite of his own repeated witness, is that he spent a quarter of a century in a quest for transcendent reality, in an attempt to discover the secret of the universe."<sup>136</sup>

A revealing part of the night-warbler story is Thoreau's expressed fear of finding it, for "as soon as you find it you become its prey." In other words, he realizes that, if he were to positively identify spirit, then he would be obliged to give himself to it, by entering into a personal relationship with it--that being the only proper response to what he called in A Week "IT" and "THOU." That is, he would lose his life in service to it, and this he did not want. Consequently, as mentioned before, he hesitated to let any spiritual encounter fully develop. He wanted proof of a heaven, but did not want to give his freedom to whatever power was behind it.

<sup>136</sup> Seybold, p. 7.

Thus Thoreau spent his life in nature: looking for hints, but not daring to find proofs of the spiritual world that he believed was each soul's destiny. Many of those who knew him commented on his habitually appearing to be in pursuit of something. John Weiss, for instance, reports that Thoreau's eyes often appeared to be searching, and that he gave the impression of being on the verge of finding something. Weiss also notes the religious character of the quest: he says of Thoreau, "He went about, like a priest of Buddha who expects to arrive soon at the summit of a life of contemplation, where the divine absorbs the human."<sup>137</sup>

Those who know Thoreau through his writings have come to similar decisions concerning his life purpose. John Burroughs--who knew what a naturalist is--suggests that Thoreau was not so much interested in natural history as in "supernatural history," in "a bird behind the bird."<sup>138</sup> That is, Thoreau was primarily interested in the spiritual realm, and used nature as a means "to gain admittance to this inner and finer heaven of things."<sup>139</sup> And Paul Elmer More--who knew what religion is--writes in response to the publication of Thoreau's journals in 1906, "Perhaps, in the end, what remains in the mind of the reader is the sense of constant expectancy that plays on almost every page of his works. . . . He walked the fields like one who was on the alert for some divine apparition. . . ."<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Weiss, "Thoreau," p. 41, cols. 1, 2.

<sup>138</sup> John Burroughs, Indoor Studies (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), pp. 37, 40.

<sup>139</sup> Burroughs, p. 37.

<sup>140</sup> Paul Elmer More, "Thoreau's Journal," in Shelburne Essays, Fifth Series (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1908), p. 130.

It was because Thoreau had had some visions--on top of Saddle-back, for instance--that he continued to watch for them throughout his life, and was therefore such a close observer of nature. As Norman Foerster notes, for Thoreau "Nature, rightly read, was the key to all mysteries. . . ." <sup>141</sup> Thus, he went on his walks, not to study the physical world in itself, but to find--in the flowers, animals, rivers, ponds, and meadows--traces of the ineffable, hints of the divine.

It is therefore apparent that not only the supposedly disparate materials of A Week, but many of Thoreau's best writings, and most of his life, are united by a central theme--the quest in nature for spiritual suggestions of man's immortality. The impetus behind this search was his desire to be reunited with his brother. Despite his attacks on conventional religion, his core--like that of Transcendentalism in general--was religious. That Thoreau considered his vocation to be that of seeking salvation is evident in his complaint, lodged in his journal entry of December 28, 1852, that "the man who does not betake himself at once and desparately to sawing is called a loafer, though he may be knocking at the doors of heaven all the while, which shall surely be opened to him" (J, IV, 433).

There have been those who have noted Thoreau's concern with immortality. John S. Smith, in his 1948 dissertation on Thoreau's

<sup>141</sup> Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), p. 77.

religion, calls him "a man seeking the salvation of his soul."<sup>142</sup> And Walter Harding states, "Walden, on its highest level is a guide to the saving of your own soul, to a spiritual rebirth."<sup>143</sup> Yet this <sup>aspect of Thoreau</sup> has not been taken into consideration by most critics in their studies of Thoreau's works. As this study has shown, however, by a close look at A Week, and a quick overview of some of his other writings, a main purpose of Thoreau's is to assure man of his immortality.

As many have noted, Thoreau's life-long search was for reality; however, it bears repeating that his concept of reality was as much spiritual as it was material. His spiritual concern enriched his view of life and consequently made him a better artist. As when he was a little boy, he both saw the stars and tried to see the power behind them.

In Walden, Thoreau writes, "Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business" (98). His business, it turns out, was to prepare for immortality by living in a way befitting an immortal being. And, by recording his preparations in his writings, to move others to do the same.

<sup>142</sup> Smith, p. iv.

<sup>143</sup> Walter Harding, "Five Ways of Looking at Walden," in Thoreau in Our Season, ed. J. H. Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962), p. 55.

## Epilogue

It is fortunate that Thoreau built his ship of faith in man's immortality, for of the Transcendentalist triumvirate--Alcott, Emerson, and himself--he was both the last to come into this world and the first to go.<sup>1</sup> In December of 1860, Thoreau, characteristically trying to find out more secrets of the natural world, had spent a cold afternoon counting the rings on tree stumps. He caught a cold that was the beginning of his final illness.<sup>2</sup> That winter he spent ten weeks confined to the house because of respiratory problems. He had tuberculosis.<sup>3</sup>

By the following summer he had lost a great deal of weight and vitality and therefore travelled to Minnesota, in hope that its dry air would benefit his lungs. When he returned to Concord two months later he was more worn than when he had left. In late September he made his last visit to Walden Pond: while his sister sketched "he gathered wild grapes and dropped them one by one into the water."<sup>4</sup> By winter it was obvious that he would not live much longer. Friends began to make their final visits.

In mid-January of 1862, his friends Harrison Blake and Theo

<sup>1</sup> "Theosophist Unaware," Theosophy, 6 (April 1944), 290.

<sup>2</sup> Harding, Days, p. 441.

<sup>3</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 442, 451.

<sup>4</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 442, 445, 450, 454.

Brown skated the fifteen miles down the Sudbury River from Framington to see him. A beautiful snowstorm was going on outside as the three men talked, and Brown remembered the following of their conversation:

Blake asked him how the future seemed to him. "Just as uninteresting as ever," was his characteristic answer. A little while after he said, "You have been skating on this river; perhaps I am going to skate on some other." And again, "Perhaps I am going up country."<sup>5</sup>

The radically different answers that Thoreau gave are typical of his stands on death. His first response, in which he expressed a lack of interest in the subject, illustrates the facade that he projected to society, whose religious orthodoxy he enjoyed agitating. Probably realizing that he was with friends, however, he later revealed his true feelings--his wish that there be an afterlife that is much like this world. He still held the same hopes as those expressed in "Brother where dost thou dwell?" and in the first epigraph to A Week--that there would be "loftier mounts" and "fairer rivers."

It was probably because of the strength provided by this hope that Henry, in the same way that his brother had done, submitted to his fate without complaint. After one visit to Thoreau, Sam Staples told Emerson that he had "'never spent an hour with more satisfaction. Never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and

<sup>5</sup> Ricketson, Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, p. 214, in Harding, Days, p. 456.

peace."<sup>6</sup> Although he was so ill that he could only speak in a faint whisper, Thoreau continued preparing such essays as "Autumnal Tints," "Walking," and "Wild Apples," for publication.<sup>7</sup> When his neighbour, Rev. Reynolds, visited him and found him bravely working on his manuscripts, Thoreau looked up, and, "with a twinkle in his eye," whispered, "'you know it's respectable to leave an estate to one's friends,'"<sup>8</sup> It is as though Thoreau was fulfilling Emerson's statement in "Worship," that "Immortality will come to such as are fit for it, and he who would be a great soul in ~~the~~ future, must be a great soul now."<sup>9</sup> Sophia Thoreau, writing of Henry's illness to Daniel Ricketson on April 6, confessed, "Henry accepts this dispensation with such childlike trust and is so happy that I feel as if he were being translated rather than dying in the ordinary way of most mortals."<sup>10</sup> The similarity in the manner in which Henry and John each abided his dying is evident when this statement is placed beside Lidian Emerson's response to John's end: "I feel as if a pure spirit had been translated."<sup>11</sup>

The manner in which Thoreau accepted the incontrovertible is

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals, IX, 405-16, in Harding, Days, p. 460.

<sup>7</sup> Harding, Days, p. 458.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Worship," in The Conduct of Life (1904; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 239.

<sup>10</sup> Ricketson, Daniel Ricketson and His Friends, pp. 136-37, in Harding, Days, p. 460.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of Lidian Emerson, in Myerson, p. 105.

reminiscent of an observation he had made twenty years earlier, in a letter written to console Emerson for the death of Waldo:

Every blade in the field--every leaf in the forest--lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up. It is the pastime of a full quarter of the year. Dead trees--sere leaves--dried grass and herbs--are not these a good part of our life?<sup>12</sup>

In "Solitude," at the end of a description of nature's beneficent and eternal health, he writes that no man should ever grieve, for he is a part of nature. He asks, "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (Walden, 138). Accordingly, he would give up his life as beautifully as does the autumnal foliage. Toward the end of his life he took many notes on how the leaves changed in the fall: the essay "Autumnal Tints," one of those which he was revising in his final months, was culled from a large, approximately 250 page manuscript called "The Fall of the Leaf."<sup>13</sup> In this essay, he wrote of the leaves,

How beautifully they go to their graves! how gently lay themselves down and turn to mould! . . . They teach us how to die. One wonders if the time will ever come when men, with their boasted faith in immortality, will lie down as gracefully and as ripe,--with such an Indian-summer serenity will shed their bodies. . . .<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Blanding, "Sauntering Toward the Holy Land: The Writing of Thoreau's Last Excursion Essays," a lecture presented by the Thoreau Lyceum, Concord, Mass., 14 July 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," in Excursions and Poems, Vol. V of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (1906; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1968), 269-60.

Thoreau, in his final days, expressed his faith symbolically, by not fighting death. His belief in immortality was communicated indirectly--as it had been in his writings.

Despite the severity of his illness, he survived the winter. It was almost as though he did not want to die until spring came once more, and reassured him that death does give way to life. When the winter did end, and a friend announced the arrival of the first robin, Thoreau said, "'Yes! This is a beautiful world; but I shall see a fairer.'"<sup>15</sup>

He had his own faith, and was therefore perturbed when acquaintances and relatives with more orthodox beliefs pressured him about religion. It was to a female friend of the family who was anxious about "how he stood affected toward Christ," that he answered that "a snow-storm was more to him than Christ."<sup>16</sup> His answer to his Aunt Louisa, who asked him if he had made his peace with God, is well known and has already been mentioned, as has his famous reply to Parker Pillsbury--"One world at a time."<sup>17</sup> In all these cases his responses are defensive reactions to what he felt as religious aggression, for, as has been made clear, Thoreau was not unconcerned with God and the hereafter. As John Weiss notes, readers should not assume "a lack of religion" in Thoreau's answers.

<sup>15</sup> Emily Lyman, Thoreau (Concord, 1902), in Harding, Days, p. 462.

<sup>16</sup> Weiss, "Thoreau," p. 46, cols. 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Harding, Days, p. 465.

He adds that they have only to go to Walden and A Week to see proof of his spiritual concerns.<sup>18</sup>

It is apparent that Thoreau had two kinds of responses when he was confronted with religious questions: a posed one for the public, and a truer one for his friends. As shown in his writings, he responded negatively whenever confronted by social forms of religion. The old family friend, his aunt, and Pillsbury were all representatives of a society he disliked. The old friend was probably of the same type as Aunt Louisa, whom Edward Emerson labels "Calvinistic."<sup>19</sup> Pillsbury, notes Harding, was a "fiery old abolitionist."<sup>20</sup> Thus, he stood for both the older generation and for the group that Thoreau calls "the restless class of Reformers" (A Week, 130), "the greatest bores of all" (Walden, 154). To all three, therefore, he reacted with witty remarks intended both to challenge and remind them that he was not one of them. His answers were like the one he gave to Blake before he realized that the circumstances did not demand a contest. Beneath all of these socially directed answers, then, there was a faith that he expressed only to close friends--and, through the indirect means of art, to sympathetic readers. Thoreau's actual concept of death is revealed not in "One world at a time," but in "Perhaps I am going up country," "This is a beautiful world; but I shall see a fairer," and, on his

<sup>18</sup> Weiss, "Thoreau," p. 46, col. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Emerson, Thoreau as Remembered, p. 117.

<sup>20</sup> Harding, Days, p. 451.

deathbed, "Now comes good sailing."<sup>21</sup>

Thoreau did not die until the spring had well arrived. By the first week of May the ice would have been off of Walden for a month, birds would already have nested and laid eggs, and flowers would have bloomed. Indeed, a few hours before his death on the morning of May 6, he had smelled a bouquet of hyacinths brought in from a neighbour's garden.<sup>22</sup> Not only had he seen the rebirth of spring, but he had also seen the night give way to another dawn and a new day.

Thoreau's funeral was held in the First Parish Church. Alcott, who was superintendent of the Concord schools at the time, cancelled classes, and many children attended the service. The casket, covered with wild flowers, contained a wreath of andromeda and three mottoes inscribed by Ellery Channing.<sup>23</sup> One inscription read, "'Hail to thee, O man, who art come from the transitory place to the imperishable.'"<sup>24</sup> The church bell tolled forty-four times and Emerson read a long eulogy.

In contrast to the funeral sermon for John Thoreau, in which Rev. Frost had raised doubts concerning that young Transcendentalist's religion, Emerson's sermon stressed Henry's religiosity above

<sup>21</sup> Thoreau, in Blanding, "Sauntering."

<sup>22</sup> Harding, Days, p. 466.

<sup>23</sup> Harding, Days, pp. 466-67.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Harding, "The Last Days of Henry Thoreau," in The Thoreau Centennial, ed. Walter Harding (Albany: State University of New York, 1964), p. 43.

all else. In regard to Thoreau's vocation as a writer, he noted that Henry had once told him, "'The other world is all my art; my pencils will draw no other; my jack-knife will cut nothing else. . . .'"<sup>25</sup> Of his younger friend's love of nature, he said that "so much knowledge of Nature's secret and genius few others possessed; none in a more large and religious synthesis."<sup>26</sup> He even explained Thoreau's assaults on the church as being the result of his excelling it in godliness. He states,

Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought. Of course, the same isolation which belonged to his original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms. This is neither to be censured nor regretted. Aristotle long ago explained it, when he said, "One who surpasses his fellow citizens in virtue is no longer a part of the city. Their law is not for him, since he is a law to himself."<sup>27</sup>

(Of course Emerson was also justifying his own, and the other Transcendentalists', self-reliance in religion.) Thus, because Thoreau's religion was based on intuition and correspondence, rather than on dogma, Emerson asserts that he had "spiritual perception," and he calls him a "truth-speaker."<sup>28</sup> Having established that Thoreau was godly, and that his approach to religion was valid, he ends on

<sup>25</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 464.

<sup>26</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 472.

<sup>27</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 477.

<sup>28</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," pp. 474, 478.

the theme of eternal life.

After giving an account of the edelweiss, which he notes is of the same genus as the plant called "'Life-Everlasting,'" and which young men climb cliffs for, even risking death, he states, "Thoreau seemed to me living in the hope to gather this plant, which belonged to him of right."<sup>29</sup> That is, Emerson acknowledges that the central quest of Thoreau's life was to find both the proof of, and the path to, immortality. In the final line of the eulogy, then, Emerson assures the mourners that Thoreau's soul would find a resting place: "His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home."<sup>30</sup> Thoreau's own sayings and writings--in which he used more concrete words and images to describe the afterlife than does Emerson here--reveal that he possessed the same faith. As Raymond Adams notes, "Thoreau did think of more than one world at a time. . . ."<sup>31</sup>

Thoreau once wrote to a friend, "Haven't we our everlasting life to get? And isn't that the only excuse at last for eating drinking sleeping or even carrying an umbrella when it rains?"<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 484.

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, "Thoreau," p. 485.

<sup>31</sup> Adams, p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 298.

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