

River Gloom and River Glory: Thoreau's Novel Employment of the Romantic Sublime in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

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Abstract

The paper argues that that Thoreau in his books *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* presented the river as a symbol that he deliberately chose as an invocation of the sublime, and that the river's cyclic nature presages his later devotion to "looking beneath" the macro order in his quest for apprehending nature's magnitude.¹ Finally, it argues that that John's horrifying death due to the hidden microscopic processes of tetanus (then not clearly understood) was the original catalyst for Thoreau's settling on the unseen depths of water as his preferred symbol for the sublime.

Keywords: Thoreau, Merrimack, Rivers, Nature, Romantic, Sublime

One of the two books Henry David Thoreau superintended to completion during his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* has long been considered a tribute to Thoreau's older brother John, who died three years after the journey referenced in the work's title and seven years before its actual publication.¹ *A Week* commemorates an 1839 river trip in which the brothers set out from their native Concord, Massachusetts, proceeded upstream into New Hampshire after turning onto the Merrimack River, and a few days later retraced their route to return home. Linck C. Johnson, in his 1986 study of *A Week's* evolution, describes the resulting book as the amalgamation of two literary genres, "the excursion, which provided strong narrative and symbolic elements, and the elegy, the source of important thematic and structural elements" (xii). Further, Johnson indicates that *A Week* privileges the river as the prime focus of the text, even though the ostensible reason for the Thoreau brothers' journey was to reach the White Mountains of New Hampshire in an economical manner. Yet, Thoreau declines the opportunity to focus on the majesty of the mountain-climbing experiences of the trip, and instead "describes a river excursion" (13, 4).

Thoreau's choice of focus is at first glance surprising, because he and the other Transcendentalists were steeped in the Romantic tradition of mountains and oceans as a source of the sublime. Even though Wordsworth's *Prelude* was not yet available when Thoreau finished revising *A Week* in 1849, Wordsworth's memorable scenes such as being terrified by the hulking cliff during the rowboat episode on the Ullswater, his crossing of the Alps by way of the Simplon Pass, and his rising above the clouds on Mount Snowdon would not have been

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particularly alien to those Transcendentalists who sought intimations of the infinite in their poetic reading matter. Works definitely available to Thoreau and the Transcendentalists were Byron's "Childe Harold" (in which the eponymous character commented that "high mountains are a feeling"), Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *Alastor*, and a variety of prose and poetic works by Wordsworth, including "To ---- on Her First Ascent to the Summit of Helvellyn" and his *Guide to the Lakes* (Nicolson 1, 2, 7-8, 390). If one stipulates that the death of John Thoreau Jr. indeed called for the invocation of the sublime in his brother's attempts to represent that death aesthetically, then Thoreau's passing on the opportunity to employ the symbolic potential of the White Mountains is unorthodox. I argue, however, that the river is precisely the symbol that Thoreau chose as an invocation of the sublime, and further, that the river's cyclic nature presages his later devotion to "looking beneath" the macro order in his quest for apprehending nature's magnitude.¹¹ Finally, I argue that John's horrifying death due to the hidden microscopic processes of tetanus (then not clearly understood) was the original catalyst for Thoreau's settling on the unseen depths of water as his preferred symbol for the sublime.

The sublime has been defined by Philip Shaw as "the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated." Simultaneously, however, the individual is able to intuit something about the nature of that which he or she cannot apprehend directly through normal reasoning processes or even through direct perception (3). In *The Sublime*, Shaw traces the history of the sublime as an object of rhetorical study to the Greek scholar Longinus, who wrote that the sublime may be invoked by traditional devices such as simile, metaphor, periphrasis, hyperbole, and comparison, but that these devices do not necessarily call forth the sublime. Reciprocally, the sublime may be induced without any of the aforementioned rhetorical devices. In sum, Shaw asserts that "the sublime is a state of feeling, which may be loosely described as wonder, awe, rapture, astonishment, ecstasy, or elevation." (14). To apply Longinus's rhetorical thinking to Thoreau, then, one would normally search for instances in which the author's many contemplations on the works of nature as he and his brother float down the river are linked to the ability of language to rise to high sentiments, but not necessarily to the very inscrutability of the river, its current, its depth, its source, or any other descriptor that characterizes the water as somehow beyond human understanding.

To stop with Longinus, however, would be to stipulate that anything Thoreau says about the river is merely rhetorical flourish. Later traditions link the sublime to the natural world and de-emphasize the self-preferentiality of rhetorical device for aesthetic effect alone, and by the time of the Romantic poets, Shaw writes, is seen in Wordsworth's *Prelude* as "abundant recompense for the disappointing encounter with nature." Shaw further speculates that, for Wordsworth, the sublime is "not the grandeur of the Alps, but the 'awful Power' of

Imagination" (101). Notably, every instance that Shaw describes in Wordsworth's poetry involves a mountain scene.

The privileging of mountains as a source of the sublime is not surprising, given that English and Continental writers for the previous two centuries had been working out the sublime as an explication of the infinite, argues Marjorie Hope Nicolson in her 1959 book *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. In fact, by the time the Romantics took the stage, the status of the sublime as expounded by writers such as Addison, Dennis, and Shaftsbury was as follows:

From Infinite God to Infinite Space to vast objects in the world and back again from the "great" in external Nature through Space and infinite or indefinite worlds to Infinite God--such is the threefold process of the "pleasures of the imagination." The "pleasure" man felt in mountains and ocean, in stars and space, lay in the enlargement of the soul to experience more completely the powers, desires, and aspirations given by its great Original, the true Infinite. (321)

Thoreau, of course, does not typically invoke the Christian God that is clearly the source of the writers whom Nicolson describes, nor is he particularly interested (in *A Week*, at least) in oceans or stars. Rather, his focus is squarely on the river, and as the context inevitably makes clear, on death and humans' inability to apprehend it with their normal faculties. The river, therefore, is both a memorial to John Thoreau—an epitaph for the benefit of future generations--and a highly intuitive attempt to link the processes of nature with the question of whether human death makes sense in a larger context.

In his posthumous book *The Romantic Sublime*, Tom Weiskel offers a slightly different vantage in viewing the sublime, noting that the very word itself from the Greek, "*hypsos*, or height, is metaphor presiding over the illusions endemic to reading" (4). Further continuing his own metaphor of elevation, Weiskel explains that "we are uplifted as if instinctively, and our proud flight exalts our soul *as though we had created* what we merely heard. This is an important distinction between Weiskel and the aforementioned passage by Nicolson, for Weiskel emphasizes the psychological dimension of the sublime. In fact, he states that the purpose of his book is "to explore the structure implicit in the act of 'joining' with the great" (11). Finally, Weiskel locates the modern development of the sublime within the expanding cosmology engendered by 17th-century breakthroughs in science, when writers were eager to liken the infinitude of God with certain dazzling elements of the natural world "which seemed to approach that immensity" (14). Pre-Romantic began with the mountains and oceans that were so obviously grand in scale as compared to human frailty, and eventually turned to "all the grander aspects of nature" (14).

It is within these grander aspects where one may locate Thoreau's

apprehension of the sublime, traumatically begun for him when confronted with the fact that his brother was dying a horrendous death from a poorly-understood invader of his body that was running its course entirely by way of internal processes. If nature held the key to life and death, then surely the microscopic processes that ravaged John Thoreau's body were as immense as those that built mountains and filled oceans. In fact, Edmund Burke in the late 18th century similarly posits that the extremely small can also represent the sublime in a manner that seemingly approaches the concept of the mathematical limit:

[W]hen we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter, when we pursue animal life into these excessively small, and yet organized beings, that escape the nicest inquisition of the sense, when we push our discoveries yet downward, and consider those creatures so many degrees yet smaller, and the still diminishing scale of existence, in tracing which the imagination is lost as well as the sense, we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness. (Burke 72)

As such, the ideal of the sublime was not totally confined by the late 18th century to the extremely large or vast; rather, it exists for Burke as normally manifest in larger dimensions relative to human form. After all, Burke begins the chapter with the words “[g]reatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime. This is too evident, and the observation too common, to need any illustration” (71). One might say that, for Burke, smallness can be vastness in certain limited ways. At any rate, the scales are relative if one goes about the argument mathematically, Burke implies:

For division must be infinite as well as addition; because the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a complete whole to which nothing may be added. (72)

Any alternate conclusion would have to imply that the mountains and oceans are not only superior to the individual life--which is fairly easy to argue--but also superior to the driving force behind life itself.ⁱⁱⁱ To this latter prospect, any Transcendentalist would blanch. Moreover, attributing John's senseless death to God's will may have been typical of the day--and in fact, one of John's last rational utterances (Johnson 42) was “[t]he cup that my Father gives me, shall I not drink it?” But such was not adequate for Thoreau, and soon after John's death, he began redirecting his already-begun manuscript as a tribute (Johnson 11). Finally satisfied with the text after years of revision, he published it in 1849.

A work probably available to Thoreau prior to the publication of *A Week* was Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs*.^{iv} If so, he would have been familiar with the Romantic poet's initial condition of “A Monument, upon which [the epitaph is to be] engraved” (169).^v If John is the subject of the epitaph, then the

proper monument--for a writer, at least--is a book in which the epitaph may be adequately inscribed. Thoreau would also have read in the first of the *Essays* that his desire to memorialize John in such a fashion is perfectly normal for the following reasons:

[V]erily, without the consciousness of a principle of immortality in the human soul, Man could never have awakened in him the desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows: mere love, or the yearning of kind towards kind, could not have produced it. (169)

Wordsworth's prose work may or may not provide a rationale for Thoreau's proleptic need for memorialization, but the above lines are also in keeping with Thoreau's decision not to discuss John or in any way describe him individually in the text of *A Week*. Rather, Thoreau invariably and almost relentlessly refers to John only in the plural sense, even going so far at one point as to describe the individual dreams the brothers had on the banks of the river without revealing which brother had which dream. Today we have no idea of how obsessed Thoreau was with John's traumatic death in the latter years of his brief life, but we do see that John lives "in remembrance of his fellows" insofar as he is a character in a written text.

The collapsing of the individual consciousnesses of the two brothers in *A Week* is also noteworthy when one considers the precise nature of John's death to tetanus in 1842, and its documented physical impact on Thoreau.^{vi} As Robert Richardson Jr. recounts in his book *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, the tragedy began with a seemingly minor incident on Jan. 1, 1842, when John cut the tip of his left ring finger while shaving. He apparently replaced the shaved-off skin and bandaged the finger, but nine days later began showing the clear signs of tetanus, or lockjaw. Thoreau helped nurse him, but the doctors said John was terminally ill, and indeed John died literally in Thoreau's arms after two days of unimaginable suffering. Thoreau himself began exhibiting the symptoms of lockjaw some days later, but fortunately his affliction turned out to be the result of psychological trauma rather than actual infection by microbes, and he recovered physically (Richardson 113).

As previously noted, Thoreau decided to redirect his inchoate manuscript of the 1839 river adventure as a memorial to his brother.^{vii} Interestingly, there are two brothers and two rivers in the text, the rivers simultaneously being discrete entities and also seamless connected, and comprising a circuit that, if repeated, also valorizes the endless cycle of departure and return. On the very first page Thoreau writes that the Concord River (the first on which the brothers embark for the simple reason that it rather than the Merrimack flows near their home in Concord) is of seemingly endless duration relative to human time, but not "eternal" in any Biblical or mathematical sense of the term:

[The Concord] will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows

and water runs here; it will be Concord River only while men lead peaceable lives on its banks. To an extinct race it was grass-ground, where they hunted and fished, and it is still perennial grass-ground to Concord farmers, who own the Great Meadows, and get the hay from year to year. (5)^{viii}

The river thus transcends human cultures and certainly individual life-spans, although Thoreau declines the opportunity of attributing infinity as one of its characteristics. In addition, the first chapter, titled "Concord River," is the only one of the eight chapters with a name other than the day of the week on which the activities take place. Further, there is no "Merrimack River" chapter, indicating that the characterization of both rivers in an eponymous chapter will take place in one chapter alone.

Whether a single entity or conjoined, the river nevertheless holds a certain cyclic advantage over the humans one finds along its shore, for though the humans will run out of iterations over the course of a lifetime, the river will course on:

Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper. Or what they have not written on the face of the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and plowing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment. (8)

In other words, the human activities along the river can be likened to inscribing memories by way of writing. In fact, inscribing one's life is probably more durable, because the agricultural cycle has the disadvantage of "erasing what they had already written" due to the "want of parchment." Memorialization, therefore, is best written in a literal fashion; if the river itself is the tombstone in one sense and a human life in another, then the epitaph is the very words that Thoreau is voicing in his memorial text, and at the same time stands in the stead of a human life. Later, Thoreau writes that "[h]uman life is to (a fisherman on the banks) very much like a river" (24). The Thoreau brothers, of course, are both fishermen because they depend on fishing during the trip to supplement the cured pork and other staples they have brought along.

The value of a human life in relation to the river is perceptible in the first human companions that Thoreau offers as an analogue to his brother and himself--an old fisherman and his son:

I have seen how his coeval fates rewarded him with the yellow perch, and yet I thought his luck was not in proportion to his years; and I have seen when, with slow steps and weighed down with aged thoughts, he disappeared with his fish under his low-roofed

house on the skirts off the village. I think nobody else saw him; nobody else remembers him now, for he soon after died, and migrated to new Tyne streams. (24-25).

The old fisherman is not forgotten in the world of society, for he has come from his native Newcastle with his son, as Thoreau initially informs us. Rather, the old man is forgotten in the text of nature and can only be memorialized through textualization. As he proceeds with the larger task of preparing a fitting epitaph for his brother, Thoreau provides this early analogue to show that the vastness of the river is its very transcendence--or overarching--of a single human life. In this fact is the vastness of the river, its sublimity.

A few pages later in the "Saturday" chapter, in an important linkage between the world of nature and the textual world of memorialization via the nature of the river, Thoreau describes the image of a river eel that transcends the limits of a single lifespan in its own graphic manner:

They are extremely tenacious of life, opening and shutting their mouths for half an hour after their heads have been cut off. A bloodthirsty and bullying race of rangers, inhabiting the fertile river bottoms, with ever a lance in rest, and ready to do battle with their nearest neighbor. (31-32)

If the eels are intended to metaphorize humans, Thoreau implies that, while social life may be a struggle, the largest struggle of all is the existential one, transcending the petty concerns of human industry and forging for us a distinct premonition that an unseen process is at the root of the struggle. The vivid image is of a severed head fighting for air that its body can no longer even utilize.

Lest one assume at this point that Thoreau is angling toward a grim interpretation of the river as a staging ground where life is strife, he soon contextualizes the act of fishing within the act of memory:

Dim visions we still get of miraculous draughts of fishes, and heaps uncountable by the riverside, from the tales of our seniors sent on horseback in their childhood from the neighboring towns... At least one memento of those days may still exist in the memory of this generation, in the familiar appellation of a celebrated train-band of this town, whose untrained ancestors stood creditably at Concord North Bridge. (34-35)

As in the case of the old fisherman from Newcastle, all human memory of this seemingly minor event involving the descendants of the battle of Concord has been obliterated--with one notable exception. Thoreau has chanced upon a "brief passage" of a fisherman's daybook that logs the event as little more than a brief financial transaction, but one that nonetheless is a "preponderance of the fluid elements" that endures as "this fisherman's nature" (35). Once again, the human

capacity to memorialize the transitory by means of textual remembrance is the very essence of human endurance, provided that one can read the text properly--or one has at least taken the care to ensure that it is read properly. Otherwise, the sweep of human history is as vast and terrifying as the river's apparent endlessness.

When Thoreau alludes to Classical learning, his references are subsumed in the river's rubric of memorialization, for one is instructed to recall "the fables of Narcissus, of Endymion, of Memnon son of Morning, the representative of all promising youths who have died a premature death, and whose memory is melodiously prolonged to the latest morning" (58). Banking on the English similarity between the homonyms "morning" and "mourning," Thoreau here invokes his brother more directly than at any other point in the text of *A Week*. If "the representative..." is an adjectival phrase modifying "Memnon son of Morning," then memorialization is the direct responsibility of one who would contextualize Classical learning within the span of a modern human life. The mythical "Memnon," after all, owes his remembrance in part to a durable statue erected long ago by those who wished to pay him tribute. His historic existence, then, is beside the point; what is real is his textualization.

Nor should one assume that scientific discourse is to be independent of the river's capacity to aid in human memorialization:

You can hardly convince a man of an error in a life-time, but must content yourself with the reflection that the progress of science is slow. If he is not convinced, his grand-children may be. The geologist tells us that it took one hundred years to prove that fossils are organic, and one hundred and fifty more, to prove that they are not to be referred to the Noachian deluge. (64)

The river's essential reality, then, is that the fossils discovered on its banks and in its bed are not merely an artifact dating back to the Biblical flood, but rather the natural processes that also govern the life-spans of those who would apprehend their significance. However, the apprehension can easily require the span of several lifetimes. Classical and Biblical learning, then, should best be placed within the context of knowledge that may well be amended as time goes on. Indeed there may be breakthroughs that occur in the span of a single lifetime (and Thoreau would experience one himself when he read Darwin's *Origin of Species* a decade after he published *A Week*), but scientific discovery itself can be amended in the same manner as the legends and fables of the Classical and Judeo-Christian worlds. Just as we no longer study Galen and instead favor Harvey when we wish to understand the circulation of the blood, we no longer turn to the Book of Genesis to understand the fossils we find in the Concord River. But the breathtaking moment that evokes the sublime is the very process that seemingly never changes in human times, just as the river seemingly never

ceases its cyclic flow.

The Thoreau brothers in the first fifth of the book have traveled up the Concord River, for which Thoreau has not hesitated in playing on the significance of the English meaning of the word “concord.” When they travel through the Middlesex locks, however, they are set afloat in the Merrimack River that again sets up an encounter between difference and undifferentiated consciousness. For no apparent reason other than to conflate intertextuality with intersubjectivity, Thoreau notes that the brothers have “a just and equal encounter of the eyes” with the lock man, “as between two honest men” (79). Of course, there are three men involved in the encounter at the Middlesex lock, implying that the transition is not taken to determine human difference, but rather to underscore the very haziness of the Other in the act of memorialization. We may indeed live out our lives as individuals, ceaselessly being reminded that sexual mediation in a “Middlesex” lock is the only thing that ensures our biological immortalization, but our textual immortalization requires the breaking of those very boundaries.

As the longer adventure on the Merrimack River continues, Thoreau informs us that “[u]nlike the Concord, the Merrimack is not a dead but a living stream, though it has less life within its waters and on its banks” (88). This enigmatic statement indicates that the time for contemplating the life-spans of fishes and men in biological and geological time has textually passed, and that the very process of the river itself as a cyclic entity will now be in play.

As far as the individuality of the brothers is concerned, the Merrimack passages are noteworthy for Thoreau’s incessant referring to himself and his brother as “we,” never once describing them individually by name. Even in instances of cognizance, the individuality of the perceiver is suppressed with phrasing such as “for we remembered” and “forgetting where we were.” At other times physical acts are obscured, as in their taking of an incorrect turn toward a waterfall: “[s]o, each casting some blame upon the other, we withdrew quickly to safer waters” (114). Lest the reader speculate that such references are merely attributable to Thoreau’s quirky thematic style and not to thematic emphasis, Thoreau settles the matter for us at the end of the “Sunday” chapter:

One sailor was visited in his dreams this night by the Evil Destinies, and all those powers that are hostile to human life, which constrain and oppress the minds of men, and make their path seem difficult and narrow, and beset with dangers, so that the most innocent and worth enterprises appear insolent and a tempting of fate, and the gods go not with us. But the other happily passed a serene and even ambrosial or immortal night, and his sleep was dreamless, or only the atmosphere of pleasant dreams remained, 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. (116).

Here, one can best apprehend my choice of “River Gloom and River Glory” as a title for this essay. An obvious reference to Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s celebrated book on the sublime, the dreams of the undifferentiated brothers are both terrible and wonderful, implying that the human consciousness in confrontation with the vastness of nature incorporates both the nurturing and the threatening. Also, the human consciousness eventually encounters via nature the intuition that a single lifespan in no way is adequate to the task of full comprehension. The best one can hope for is an intertextual memorialization that preserves the individual through the relentless onslaught of nature’s cyclic reality. Dreams on the bank of a river must be textually memorialized if they are to endure, just like the life of the dreamer.

What’s more, the textual monument is more enduring than the social recollection of the deceased. Referring to ancient civilization but obviously referencing his brother, Thoreau offers this passage:

Of what moment are facts that can be lost,--which need to be commemorated? The monument of death will outlast the memory of the dead. The pyramids do not tell us the tale that was confided to them; the living fact commemorates itself....Where a battle has been fought, you will find nothing but the bones of men and beasts; where a battle is being fought, there are hearts beating. We will sit on a mound and muse, and not try to make these skeletons stand on their legs again. Does Nature remember, think you, that they *were* men, or rather that they *are* bones?

A likely allusion to Richard II’s lamentations of his lost crown in the Shakespearean play, this passage reminds us that our pausing to create an epitaph to the departed will inevitably be sad, but is still the link that likens us to the natural processes inherent in nature. We cannot animate the bones of the departed literally, but we can animate their memories by way of textual epitaph.

Because the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Thoreau privileged the river over the mountain as a statement of the sublime, it only makes sense to analyze one of the few mountain passages. After all, the purpose of the original 1839 trip was for the Thoreau brothers to do some climbing. In the “Tuesday” chapter, for example, Thoreau describes his ascent of Saddleback Mountain in Massachusetts, but refers only to himself with the singular pronoun “I,” abjuring the opportunity to conflate his own consciousness with that of his brother, as he has done in the previous river passages, or even to describe at length one of the actual climbs during the 1839 trip, instead electing to recollect a separate expedition. Instead, he recounts his meeting with a “hospitable young woman” (182), providing far more individual description than other persons the brothers have encountered on the river, and certainly more description than he has devoted to his deceased brother, which, in fact, is

entirely lacking throughout the text. The mountain passages, then, are recollections of memorable scenery and majestic vistas, but not evocative of the cyclic process of nature that animates the river and forges its sublime significance to the sensitive perceiver. In short, the mountains arguably provide a contrast to the river in that one exemplifies the transitory majesty of beauty, while the other exemplifies the sobering but edifying cyclic course that links all living things just beyond the ken of reason and perception.

Soon returning to the river on their way back to Concord (in other words, retracing their water route), the Thoreau brothers have additional opportunity to see the cycle of life played out in the tombstones and memorials along the way. Reading somewhat like the second and third of Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, the "Wednesday" section includes biographical sketches of individuals such as "the famous Sachem Passaconway," who lived to the age of 120 (252), as well as John Stark, a general from the Revolutionary War (253), and Wiseman Claggett, whose historical plaque Thoreau transcribes (254-255). But the memorializations are somehow muted in the context of human existence in natural history, for mere biographical detail is ultimately unsatisfying:

In my experience, persons, when they are made the subject of conversation, though with a friend, are commonly the most prosaic and trivial of facts. The universe seems bankrupt as soon as we begin to discuss the character of individuals....I say, let us speak of mushrooms and forest trees rather. Yet we can sometimes afford to remember them in private. (260)

Here, too, Thoreau's interpretation of human memorialization is reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, especially when Wordsworth disparages the flowery elegies of his literary forerunners in favor of simple statements of fact that he encounters on the tombstones of everyday people. Nevertheless, the second and third *Essays* could not have had a direct influence on *A Week*, for these were published after Wordsworth's death in 1850. The sense that an epitaph should avoid flowery or maudlin language, nonetheless, is implicit in the first *Essay*, with which Thoreau would have been familiar.

Thoreau devotes some of his more lyrical lines to the river in the final section, when he and John return to Concord a week after their departure his most protracted examination of death for the end of the "Wednesday" chapter, when he sits with his brother on the banks of the Merrimack eating supper and muses that the "world is but canvass to our imaginations" in that one's coming to realize that "what is *is*" requires more creative effort than the typical endeavor of deigning to "creep as in a dream" (292-294).

It is the dream, in fact, that animates several passages of *A Week* in which John is memorialized by the river's profundity. Late in the trip, for example, Thoreau apologizes for being obliged to omit so many important details of the

week-long journey, and ends the second-last day's account with the following:

Whenever we awoke in the night, still eking out our dreams with half-awakened thoughts, it was not till after an interval, when the wind breathed harder than usual, flapping the curtains of the tent, and causing its cords to vibrate, that we remembered that we lay on the bank of the Merrimack, and not in our chamber at home. With our heads so low in the grass, we heard the river whirling and sucking, and lapsing downward, kissing the shore as it went, sometimes rippling louder than usual, and again its mighty current making only a slight limpid trickling sound, as if our water-pail had sprung a lead, and the water were flowing into the grass by our side. (332)

It is the reality of the river that is mighty and yet trickling, imbuing both the experience and the memory of a life prematurely lost with an intuited purpose that can only be represented adequately by the textual diligence of the survivor. Gentle yet inscrutable in its cyclic nature, the river is the source of all that Thoreau can summon in memorializing his departed brother.

In conclusion, I have hewn closely to a single text in analyzing Thoreau's attitude toward the sublime, but am convinced that textual analyses of other works, particularly *Walden* and possibly even late works such as *The Dispersion of Seeds* and *Wild Fruits*, will demonstrate that Thoreau indeed departed particularly from the more traditional Romantic mountain imagery and eventually even ocean imagery (after *Cape Cod*) in describing the breathtaking inscrutability of nature. One has only to recall his musings on the bottom of Walden Pond and the location of the observer (both physically and existentially) to appreciate the contention that Thoreau came to look beneath the surface rather than toward the heavens in confronting the sublime. And though his attribution of John's death to microscopic processes rather than physically entities may have been more intuitive than empirical in 1842, his future reading of Charles Darwin would eventually justify more than ever his penchant for looking beneath the mundane surface as a source for new literary expression, the biological sublime.

Notes

ⁱ Linck Johnson writes that the written account of the trip originally shaped up as an essay, but after John's death mutated into "a remembrance of and an elegy for his brother" (212). Walter Hesford quotes Thoreau's "incessant tragedies" line in the title of a 1977 essay, arguing that Thoreau was "concerned with working his way into (fate and tragedy's) phenomenal presence in nature..." (515), and in the same essay, arguing that Thoreau attempts to interpret the silence of the river "which has engulfed Thoreau's brother even as it will engulf himself" (524). H. Daniel

Peck writes in *Thoreau's Morning Work* that Thoreau's "remembrance of his brother, prompted by the occasion of narrating their voyage, informs this landscape with the imagery of loss. Great elegies, such as *Lycidas*, characteristically displace and generalize their grief in this way" (11).

ⁱⁱ For another view on Thoreau's handling of the natural sublime in *Walden*, see Ralph W. Black's "From Concord Out: Henry Thoreau and the Natural Sublime." Black argues that Thoreau's employment of the sublime in *Walden* is similar to the "mathematical sublime" as expounded by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and discussed at length in Weiskel's book, and further, that Thoreau uses the sublime to establish a "correspondent link between landscape and identity."

ⁱⁱⁱ Thoreau is barely mentioned in the collection of essays titled *The American Sublime*, but editor Mary Arensberg in her introduction provides an interesting reading of Robert Frost's well-known sonnet "Design" (10-11). For those not familiar with the poem, the narrator asks whether the seemingly innocent eating of a white moth by a "dimpled spider, fat and white" is actually indicative of the terrible and profound forces of nature, and in fact, only seems innocent because of the reduced size relative to human proportions.

^{iv} I should emphasize the word "may." The first of the *Essays* was published in on Feb. 22, 1810, in Issue No. 25 of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's journal *The Friend*, and later reprinted in the 1814 edition of Wordsworth's own *Excursion*. Sattelmeyer does not list *The Friend* or *The Excursion* among the items Thoreau was known to have had in his hand, but surely the list is incomplete. A research assistant in Harvard's rare books library confirmed that the university indeed owns original copies of both works, but all copies now in the library were acquired well after the publication of *A Week*. Whether the Harvard library during Thoreau's lifetime owned copies of either *The Friend* or *The Excursion* and later discarded them as they became worn or were lost seems plausible, but cannot be determined for certain.

^v *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (a). All quotations are taken from the Echo Library's 2005 paperback edition of *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*.

^{vi} Paul de Man writes in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* that the epitaph is a "system of mediation that converts the radical distance of an either/or opposition in a process allowing movement from one extreme to the other by a series of transformations that leave the negativity of the initial relationship (or lack of relationship) intact" (74). In this passage de Man is writing about Wordsworth, but the following lines seem to pertain especially to the situation of John and Henry Thoreau: "[o]ne moves, without compromise, from death or life to life and death. The Wordsworthian reading of the epitaph, then, is an overt attempt to collapse the otherness that is only exacerbated by the separation of two individuals.

^{vii} The intricate details of how Thoreau altered the manuscript and how the text developed in general have been documented in the aforementioned 490-page book by Johnson titled *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers with the Text of the First Draft*. Because my thesis involves only the finished project of memorialization in relation to the sublime, however, I proceed directly to textual analysis to demonstrate the nature of the river and how it is metaphorized as a natural epitaph to John Thoreau Jr.

^{viii} All quotations are from the 1980 Princeton edition of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, edited by Carl. F. Hovde et al.

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