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# Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

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Commonplace books are difficult if not impossible objects for historicist literary study. While they can be (and have been) studied as reflections of the sensibility of the compiler, offering the critic a valuable record of an individual's course of reading,<sup>1</sup> the attempt to read commonplace books in historical context only serves to accentuate the difference between literary criticism and its object. To the critic, entries in a commonplace book gain coherence and accrue significance insofar as they offer insight into the subjectivity of the copyist, while to the compiler these texts are heterogeneous, publicly available, valuable because external to the self. The critic makes sense of a commonplace book by placing its texts in context, and yet commonplacing draws its creative charge from decontextualization. The critic takes the fragments that the compiler has assembled piecemeal, intermittently, and unevenly over time, and incorporates them into a narrative that testifies both to their internal consistency and to their congruency with their times. While the historicist critic must regard the commonplace book as typical—of an era, a culture, a social position, or a literary movement—the book itself always threatens to be useless for these purposes; it is either idiosyncratic—too particular to bear the weight of historical generalization—or, still worse, generic or unremarkable.

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*The resistance commonplace books offer to our critical paradigms suggests that they may be most valuable not for the insights they provide into past reading practices but for their ability to illuminate the limitations of our own.*

The resistance commonplace books offer to our critical paradigms suggests that they may be most valuable not for the insights they provide into past reading practices but for their ability to illuminate the limitations of our own. In this essay I turn to a commonplace book of poetry that was shared by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in order to explore aspects of some now-classic texts that have been obscured by the reading norms of late twentieth-century criticism. The temporal, national, and generic miscellaneousness of Emerson and Thoreau's commonplace book, and their untroubled circulation of poetry in partial, unidentified, and misquoted form, makes salient our own impulse to periodize, our need to make sense of literary texts within national, developmental frameworks, and our concern with originality and textual integrity. I will argue that this commonplace book is valuable both for the light it sheds on Emerson's poetic theory and for its powerful afterlife in Thoreau's first book-length narrative, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). Thoreau's *Week* is conventionally praised for the precision of its location in space and time and for the symbolic national resonance of its recovery of local history. However, we champion this book for its attention to a particular place only by overlooking the dislocating force of the poetic commonplaces on which much of the narrative depends. I will argue that in *A Week*, Thoreau uses the placelessness of the commonplace to cultivate a disjunctive, not a continuous, relation to the past. Thoreau is interested in indifference to the past as well as in the work of historical recovery; his narrative registers both the violence of New England's history and the inevitability of its erasure. This cannot be done in linear fashion. It requires the temporal disruption introduced by poetic fragments that are never fully incorporated into the narrative.

Critics' neglect of the role of poetic commonplaces in Thoreau's text stems in part from the decline of a strong historical association between poetry and travel. Not only did nineteenth-century travelers frequently take with them small volumes of poetry to read on their journeys, but many of the best-known American travel narratives rely on interpolated poems to negotiate the experience of cultural dislocation.<sup>2</sup> Poems intervene in complex ways in these narratives, providing moments of meditative arrest, shifting present-tense narration into the alternative temporal register of literary history, and placing lyric time into relation with the unnarratable scope of natural history and the alien temporalities of native cultures. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing commonly relied on poetic conventions for describing the landscape, from classical genres such as pastoral and georgic, to more

contemporary locodescriptive poems such as James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) and Wordsworth's poetry of rural retreat. Although literary critics who study travel writing tend to privilege narrative over interpolated bits of poetry, reading past the poems to get to the action, in the nineteenth-century US, the poetry often carried more weight, was of a higher cultural status, than the prose.

In Thoreau's *A Week*, interpolated poems are as much of an occasion for the narrative as the river journey itself. Thoreau's text demonstrates a profound engagement with poetry on a number of levels. In addition to epigraphs that pile up in the front matter and at the head of each chapter, the text incorporates over 60 of Thoreau's own poems and translations, as well as the poems of contemporaries such as Emerson and William Ellery Channing. *A Week* also includes Thoreau's fledgling criticism of poets such as Chaucer, Homer, Ossian, and the Roman satirist Aulus Persius Flaccus, and offers an often baffling re-contextualization of a wide range of unattributed poetry drawn from his commonplace book: classical, medieval, Renaissance, and contemporary poems; poems from high and low traditions; selections from Anacreon, Ovid, Virgil, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Francis Quarles, Sir John Denham, Felicia Hemans, and Lord Alfred Tennyson, but also Robin Hood ballads, Lovewell's fight song, and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765).

Thoreau copied most of these poems from books in Emerson's library, from Emerson's commonplace book itself, and from a trip that Emerson funded to the Harvard Library in December 1841, ostensibly to promote research for a new edition of British poetry to be edited by Thoreau. While their collaboration failed to produce the anthology as planned, the work of commonplacing they performed for this project and as part of their ordinary practice of reading and writing helped to shape their thinking about the persistence of poetry and the conditions of cultural transmission.

## 1. Emersonian Commonplaces

Poetry was very much on both Emerson's and Thoreau's minds in the early 1840s. In November 1841, Emerson delivered the first version of a lecture that laid the groundwork for his well-known essay "The Poet" (1844).<sup>3</sup> Emerson had been encouraging Thoreau's development as poet since the late 1830s, and over the objections of Margaret Fuller, sponsored the publication of a number of Thoreau's poems in *The Dial* (1840–44).<sup>4</sup> Both men were busy copying poems and fragments of poems into their journals in this period, and embarked on the anthology of English

poetry either as a collaborative project or as a way for Thoreau to launch his career as a man of letters. This plan was quickly derailed, however, most immediately by the double tragedy of the death of Thoreau's brother John and that of Emerson's son Waldo in January of 1842, and, over time, by Thoreau's decision to transform himself from an aspiring poet and editor of poetry into the author of hybrid texts such as *A Week* and *Walden* (1854).<sup>5</sup> I want to dwell on the complex conjuncture of Emerson's and Thoreau's interest in poetry around the commonplace book that formed the basis of the projected anthology—a text shared between them—to consider what the practice of commonplacing might tell us about Emerson's emerging theories of poetry, and what Thoreau's transformation of Emerson's commonplace book into a travel narrative might tell us about his attempts to put Emersonian theories into practice.

Emerson's commonplace books—of quotations and passages for declamation, as well as a poetry notebook titled “OP” for Other People, one called “Parnassus,” and another called “Parnassus Scraps”—have largely been neglected by scholars despite the rich account they give us of the range of Emerson's reading and of what Emerson and Thoreau valued in the poetry they read. Despite the extraordinary editing projects that have brought us the 16-volume *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (1960–82), edited by William H. Gilman et al., and the three-volume *Topical Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1990–94), edited by Susan Sutton Smith et al., Emerson's commonplace books of poetry have not been edited and made available to scholars. This exclusion from the corpus says more about what critics value in Emerson than about what Emerson himself valued. The logic of this exclusion is clear: this poetry is not original to Emerson. Emerson's poetry commonplace books are comprised of handwritten versions of a wide range of already printed texts, combined with scraps of newspaper poetry and poems enclosed in letters, which are either pasted or tipped into the volumes. Preparing a scholarly edition of these books can seem superfluous, particularly since Emerson published an authorized version of his commonplace books as *Parnassus* in 1874. Yet, *Parnassus* is a much belated version of the commonplace book that was actively shared between Emerson and Thoreau in 1841. Reading it as an 1870s text erases both Thoreau's collaboration in the work of commonplacing, and his importance to Emerson's thinking about the cultural place of poetry in the early 1840s.<sup>6</sup>

Commonplacing as a cultural practice can be traced to the classical conception of *topoi*, rhetorical strategies designed to ensure that an orator always had enough to say about his topic.

According to Mary Thomas Crane, Renaissance humanists redefined the abstract Aristotelian “places” (which were categories of relationship such as opposition, adjacency, correlative ideas, the relation of part to whole) as textual fragments suitable for gathering, and promoted the keeping of commonplace books as the best way of understanding and putting to use the classical past.<sup>7</sup> Textualizing the commonplaces—transforming them from places in the mind to places in a text—gave them cultural specificity; these were no longer abstract and portable modes of relation, but rather a shorthand for the prevailing cultural code. Commonplace books are a mode of cultural transmission that allows for the deracination and reframing of cultural authority. As Crane argues, in the Renaissance they were a primary tool for making classical antiquity accord with modern consensus. Perhaps because commonplacing is a technology for time-travel, Crane’s description of the hallmarks of Renaissance commonplacing rings remarkably true to nineteenth-century practice. Commonplaces tend to be already framed as quotable, ready to be plucked, favoring brevity, prescriptiveness, and a strong sense of closure. Although commonplacing is performed by individuals, it is anti-individualistic insofar as it highlights the means by which subjects, understood to be plural and iterable, are produced. Commonplace books provide a storehouse of texts through which experience can be managed and understood.

Less clearly an instrument for moderns to grapple with the ancients (although still a site for the construction and contestation of authority), nineteenth-century commonplace books nevertheless display an achronicity that offers powerful resistance to the reading norms of historicist literary criticism. For example, Emerson’s commonplace books of poetry employ multiple modes of organization, none of them chronological. In “OP,” Emerson organizes poems loosely into clusters by author with blank pages between them, though here, and in “Parnassus,” he also juxtaposes poems by different authors with anonymous poetry and with “authored” poetry copied over without attribution. Importantly, the blank pages allow for later insertions earlier in the volume, making it impossible to read the text within an evolutionary schema; it is impossible to know at any one time what Emerson’s commonplace book looked like, what it included. Like the published volume *Parnassus*, which is organized topically, with poems assembled under headings such as “Nature,” “Human Life,” “Intellectual,” “Contemplative,” “Heroic,” and so forth (followed by an author index), commonplace books eschew literary history understood as chronology. Received literary hierarchies are also put into question in the democratizing space of the

page. While Emerson most often copies over complete poems, he does not respect the formal boundaries of the poems he copies, creating, for example, a much truncated version of “Tintern Abbey” that makes its way into the published edition.<sup>8</sup> None of the criteria Michel Foucault borrows from St Jerome to describe the conditions of modern authorship pertain here. There is neither a constant level of value, nor conceptual/theoretical coherence (the topical organization and headings are supplied later); Emerson’s commonplace books are marked by stylistic diversity and temporal incoherence, both in textual terms, and in terms of the life of the writer.<sup>9</sup> Just how thoroughly these books resist our conventional ways of understanding literature became apparent to me when I ran across a series of excerpts in “Parnassus” that reflected on death and loss: first, a passage from *Macbeth* (1606), describing how death has purchased an enviable immunity for Duncan; then an excerpt from Coleridge’s translation of Schiller’s *Wallenstein* (1800) beginning, “He is gone, he is dust—”; followed (on the next page) by an anonymous epigram: “Whatever fortunes wait my future toils/The *beautiful* is vanished—and returns not.”<sup>10</sup> I found myself fighting off the conviction that Emerson had copied these poems in the months following his son Waldo’s death, struggling against my desire for the couplet to be Emerson’s own (it is Coleridge’s Schiller, an unidentified excerpt from *Wallenstein*). However, no such anchoring subjects or events are available to the readers of a commonplace book. It is this illocality—the creation of a common place that is nowhere in particular—that, I will argue, proves most seductive to Thoreau as he wrestles with the relation of locality to textual authority in *A Week*.

Many of Emerson’s commonplace book entries thematize their own fragmentary status. The selection Thoreau copied (see Figure 1) begins with a meditation by Sir Walter Scott on the piecemeal persistence of song: “Fragments of the lofty strain/Float down the tide of years/As buoyant on the stormy main/A parted wreck appears,” and includes a meditation on the creepily enduring power of a generic and deracinated “verse” (an unmarked excerpt from Wordsworth’s “Upon the Same Occasion”), an extract on extracts from Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–24), a selection on the recycling of clothing by Robert Herrick, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> The detachment of these poems and fragments from their contexts makes them more noticeably self-reflexive; they are granted the authority they wield by the act of copying itself. Importantly, these instances of poetic reproduction are both highly personal and nonproprietary, themselves open for copying. While an entry might honor the genius of a particular poet—not everything, after all, gets copied into a commonplace book—commonplacing is an

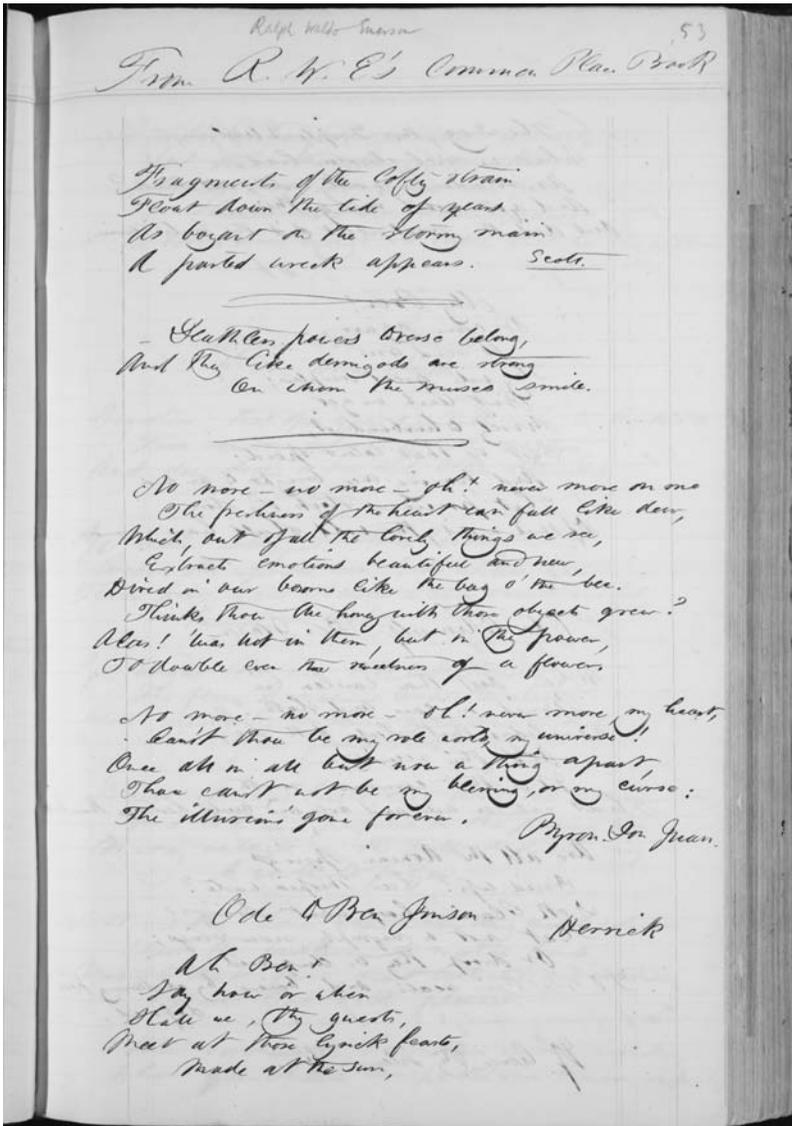


Fig. 1. Page from Thoreau's Literary Notebook. Henry David Thoreau Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

appropriate practice that acknowledges that poetry lives in a culture only by virtue of its repetition.

Before I turn to the uses to which Thoreau puts such commonplaces, I want to use this copied over copy-book to reopen the question of the relation of Emerson's theories of poetry to his poetic practice. Emerson is conventionally praised as a theorist and criticized as a poet who could not live up to his own ambitions, a prophet who called for an original American poetry that he himself could not produce. This received wisdom about Emerson has been largely produced by what Jay Grossman has identified as the composite figure "Emerson/Whitman," in which, like type to antitype,

Emerson's poetic theory is embodied in and completed by Whitman's revolutionary poetry.<sup>12</sup> However, by having Whitman too much in mind as the *telos* of Emerson's poetic theory, we both misread the theory and unnecessarily drive a wedge between Emerson's theory and his poetic practice—his writing of poetry, but also his mentoring of younger poets such as Thoreau and Ellery Channing; his keeping of commonplace books; his use of poetry in his lectures, essays, and interlocking series of journals; and his anthologizing of British poetry. A "Whitmanian" reading of Emerson's essay "The Poet" takes formal innovation—Whitman's breaking of the metrically regular line—as the Emersonian experiment Emerson himself was not bold enough to try. Such a reading focuses on Whitman's absorption of the voices of the American people and the American landscape into his capacious poem as a fulfillment of Emerson's desire for a poet who could "chant our own times and social circumstance,"<sup>13</sup> and notes Whitman's careful self-positioning as the representative poet whom Emerson describes.

However, this composite figure of Emerson/Whitman distorts Emerson's poetic theory in a number of ways. First, by emphasizing formal innovation we misread Emerson's antiformalist commitment to form. While Emerson is disdainful of adherence to convention, including poetic conventions, and abhors modes of repetition that calcify into unthinking routine, he considers the perception and articulation of forms to be the central duty of the poet. Emerson is not, as he is frequently represented to be, hemmed in by form; the innovation he celebrates in poetry has less to do with novelty than with the poet's uncanny attunement to metamorphosis, the transformation of already existing forms. Moreover, reading "The Poet" through a Whitmanian lens also makes Emerson's poetic theory seem more nationalistic than it actually is. In calling for a poet who could "chant our own times and social circumstance," Emerson is more interested in contemporaneity—poetry written today or poetry of the past that retains present power—than he is in literary nationalism.

Emerson's interest in the contemporaneity of poetry helps to reconcile his poetic theory with the practice of commonplacing. With Whitman's example and Emerson's strictures against copying in "Self-Reliance" in mind, we have misread "The Poet" as an expressive theory and underplayed the importance of mimesis to his theory and practice of poetry. Americanists could all probably cite chapter and verse from "Self-Reliance": "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half-possession" (278–79). However, an "extemporaneous half-possession" is precisely

what Emerson values in poetry. Emerson celebrates both the extra-temporal experience of lyric transport, embodied in the timelessness of his commonplace miscellanies, and the half-possession which is characteristic of the writing and the reading of poetry—the external-ity of poetic inspiration to the poet himself, who experiences it as transient, nonproprietary, but also the multiple acts of appropriation that are necessary for poetry to retain its power.

Emerson's poetic theory may accurately be described as an expressive theory so long as we acknowledge that he understood both reading and hearing as fundamentally expressive acts. Take, for example, his definition of "expression" from the 1841 lecture "The Poet." Emerson begins with a sense of urgency retained in the published essay: "Expression;—all we do, all we say, all we see, is that, or for that" (*Early* 350). Yet he turns for his example to an audience-eye view of Paganini's and Taglioni's artistry: "what is the origin of our enjoyment but an appraisal of our own power,—that the range of human articulation reaches higher and lower than we had yet found, and every hearer goes away to copy or appropriate to himself as far as he can the new art?" (*Early* 350). He continues with an account of performance as a kind of surrogacy, explaining the lure of Taglioni: "But what is her charm for the spectators other than this, that she dances for them, or they dance in her feet, not being . . . able to dance themselves? We must be expressed" (*Early* 351).

If in his lecture Emerson defines the consumption of art as a mode of expression, in his essay "The Poet" he describes *poesis* as transcription rather than an independent act of making:

The sea, the mountain ridge, Niagara, and every flower-bed, pre-exist, or super-exist in pre-cantations which sail like odors in the air, and when any man goes by with an ear sufficiently fine, he overhears them, and endeavors to write down the notes without diluting or depraving them. (*Essays* 458–59)

The transformation of nature into poetry is only part of a larger process of metamorphosis to which the poet is uniquely attuned. In one of the most memorable figures of the essay, Emerson argues that poetry lies embedded in ordinary language and in ordinary labor: "Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value, as the carpenter's stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze" (*Essays* 452). Invoking the "carpenter's stretched cord" as a kind of working-man's Aeolian harp, Emerson suggests that we need only sharpen our attention to transform routine acts of measuring into musical measures ("if you hold your ear close enough").

However, he also implies that poetry exists in the world independently of our perception; this music is produced regardless of our willingness or ability to hear it. For Emerson, the poet's "better perception" enables him to stand "one step nearer to things" than the ordinary man: the poet "sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multi-form; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, [the poet] uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature" (*Essays* 456). Emerson here calls not for a revolt against form but for a higher consciousness of it, with poetry aspiring to the "self-regulated motion" (*Essays* 457) of the natural world.

What I want to emphasize is how well and how easily Emerson's poetic theory accommodates a copy-book understanding of poetic history. In "The Poet," Emerson describes poetic transmission as a kind of transplantation that allows for the accidental survival of some poems and not others; the poet is compared to "a poor fungus" which shakes down "countless spores, any one of which, being preserved, transmits new billions of spores" (*Essays* 457). In his famous account of language as the "archives of history," Emerson acknowledges that language is also "a sort of tomb of the Muses"; the accrual of tropes through history shakes them free of their "poetic origin" (*Essays* 457). Finally, he suggests that it is the fragmentary nature of poetic inheritance that allows poems and poets to achieve a kind of contemporaneity, to "chant our own times and social circumstance" despite their importation from ancient history and from foreign places. In another striking figure, Emerson describes the "rich poets" such as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael as mirrors "carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing" (*Essays* 467). Mimesis, conventionally aligned with the realist novel, is here produced by the fragmentary, mobile nature of poetic tradition; it is extemporaneity that allows for contemporaneity.

## **2. Decontextualization and the Transmission of Culture: Anticipating the Lapse of Time**

Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* can be seen as a response and a challenge to Emerson's conjoined theory and practice of poetry. Although Emerson and Thoreau's friendship was pushed to the breaking point over the eventful seven-year period in which Thoreau drafted and redrafted this text—a period that includes Thoreau's move to Walden, his move back into Emerson's house while his mentor was on a European

tour, and the complex breach between them upon Emerson's return<sup>14</sup>—Thoreau positions himself just as assuredly as Whitman would as the incarnation of Emerson's ideal poet. Thoreau does this most conspicuously in the epigraph to the first chapter, in which he sets the geographic and generic coordinates of his own text by quoting some Virgilian lines from Emerson's "Musketaquid," but also in the epigraph to "Thursday" where he selectively quotes Emerson's poem "Woodnotes" so as to suggest he himself is the poem's "forest seer." Thoreau does this so successfully as to prompt generations of scholars repeatedly to assert that Emerson wrote the poem before he met Thoreau.<sup>15</sup>

Reading the hybrid figure as Emerson/Thoreau rather than Emerson/Whitman casts Emerson's poetics in a different light. Like Whitman, Thoreau attempts to demonstrate that poetry is immanent in the American landscape, but unlike Whitman, whose histrionics of projective identification make the poet himself the medium of reconciliation between nature and culture, Thoreau wants to claim that a naturalized poetry exists independently of the poet-observer. Moreover, he uses poetry to inscribe a disjunctive relation to the past, not to overcome temporal and spatial dislocation. Thoreau's text maps a precise locality at the same time as it acknowledges the irruption into this place of fragments of prior cultures—both relics of Indian civilizations and Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. I draw attention to the poetic disruptions in Thoreau's text because it is the extemporaneous, dispossessing aspects of Emerson's and Thoreau's writing that a historicist criticism has been least able to account for: the complex pleasures of discontinuity and anachrony, and the power of decontextualization. One might measure the threat Thoreau's text poses to a historicist literary nationalism by Princeton's publication of a scholarly edition of *The Illustrated A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1983) or, more simply, by the map provided as a frontispiece to the Penguin edition.<sup>16</sup> This is a text that is always in danger of slipping its moorings to the New England locale that is its putative subject and ground of value.

One way to describe the difficulty and sheer strangeness of this text is to note that it is suspended between incompatible modes of representation: on the one hand, the travel narrative, with its specific setting, defined *telos*, central figure of the traveler-observer, and temporal continuity of the trip; and on the other hand, the commonplace book, a multivocal, discontinuous collection of sententiae, foregoing temporal order and continuity for abstraction, giddy swerves into self-referentiality, and the generative nature of juxtaposition. Henry Seidel Canby trenchantly described *A Week* as "an anthology carried upon a frame of a

story... perilously like a library of the shorter works of Henry David Thoreau" (272). Yet it is not always clear which is the frame, and which the content. Thoreau uses the structure of the voyage to string together his poetic meditations, and yet he also relies on poetic commonplaces to saturate his locale with significance. Thoreau takes seriously Emerson's warning against travel in "Self-Reliance." *A Week* is a perfectly Emersonian anti-travel travel narrative, a suburban boat trip in which, Thoreau claims, "I never voyaged so far in all my life" (7). Rather than concede the irrelevance of the Concord and Merrimack rivers, however, Thoreau uses poetic associations with famous rivers such as the Helicon, the Nile, and the Thames to frame his subject and relies on interpolated poetry to open this unremarkable locale up to the infinite.<sup>17</sup>

Take, for example, Thoreau's description in "Friday" of a Concord cattle-show, a narrative episode prompted by its metaphorical association with the falling leaves. Thoreau attends to the men whose attentions are drawn to the cattle show, describing them as

Running hither and thither, with appetite for the coarse pastimes of the day, now with boisterous speed at the heels of the inspired negro from whose larynx the melodies of all Congo and Guinea Coast have broke loose in our streets, now to see the procession of a hundred yoke of oxen, all as august and grave as Osiris, or the droves of neat cattle and milch cows as unspotted as Isis or Io. Such as had no love for Nature

"at all,  
Came lovers home from this great festival." (337)

As if to keep his own description from too close association with the racially marked, "coarse pleasures" he initially describes, Thoreau shifts from drawing an analogy between the cattle-show and Greek festivals, to using the unidentified quotation from Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" (1598) to recast this relation, wresting the quotation out of context so that it refers not to the worshippers of Adonis but to Thoreau's contemporaries. This is a typically Thoreauvian revision. In "Hero and Leander," the festival is a site for assignations and for falling in love; Thoreau transforms this fragment so that it conjures the love of Nature. Like Renaissance commonplace books with one compass foot in antiquity and the other in an unruly modernity, Thoreau uses interpolated poetry to shift authority from the classical past to rural Massachusetts, but, crucially, he does this while also

claiming that the bearers of this authority remain unaware of the connection. Thoreau notes with some relief that “the whole paraphernalia of the Panathenae, which appear so antiquated and peculiar, have their parallel now. The husbandman is always a better Greek than the scholar is prepared to appreciate, and the old custom still survives, while antiquarians and scholars grow gray in commemorating it” (337–38). Interpolated poetry enables Thoreau to model forms of cultural continuity that go unrecognized as such by their participants and unnoticed by scholars.

Thoreau’s emphasis here on the value of unconsciousness and disregard can be seen as a remedy for the egocentrism that he thought marred nineteenth-century narratives of travel. Thoreau singles out Goethe’s *Italienische Reise* (1829) for praise that damns the genre as a whole: “it was one of [Goethe’s] chief excellences as a writer, that he was satisfied with giving an exact description of things as they appeared to him, and their effect on him. Most travelers have not self-respect enough to do this simply, and make objects and events stand around them as the centre” (326). Goethe, according to Thoreau, managed to provide accurate accounts of his surroundings despite himself: “Even his reflections do not interfere with his descriptions” (326). The abstract, inhuman voicing of interpolated poems in Thoreau’s text relieves him of the burden of standing at the center of his own narrative, severing reflection from description. His quotation of poetic commonplaces also allows for a mode of awareness that hovers between Thoreau and his poetic-but-unaware-of-it subjects. The proliferation of lyric *Is* that cannot be tethered to a single speaker and the scattering of text-objects throughout the narrative serve as a formal correlative to the almost-sentient objects that Thoreau finds strewn throughout the New England landscape. I am thinking here of the circular stone eels’-nests that “look more like art than any thing in the river” (33), or the glittering coat of the old fisherman which prompts Thoreau hopefully to project: “no work of art but naturalized at length” (24). In the near autonomy of poems, naturalized artifacts, and artifactual nature, Thoreau imagines shaking off human agency; he figures the natural world as performing the work of culture independently of the observing poet.

Similarly, the modes of temporal discontinuity introduced into the narrative through interpolated poems enable Thoreau to write a history that recognizes both nature’s and his fellow man’s indifference to history, to explore modes of cultural survival that are fragmentary, incomplete, and that occur despite human disregard for the past. Thoreau distrusts claims to comprehensiveness as much as he doubts the general applicability of individual perception, noting that “the most distant mountains in the horizon

appear to rise directly from the shore of the lake in the woods by which we chance to be standing, while from the mountain-top, not only this, but a thousand nearer and larger lakes are equally unobserved" (350). If both the perception of immediacy and claims to comprehensiveness are misleading—no more than tricks of perspective—poetic history manages to escape these pitfalls through its conspicuous partiality, its inevitably fragmentary nature. For Thoreau, poetry is disruptive in its intermittency: "the poet often only makes an interruption, like a Parthian, and is off again, shooting while he retreats; but the prose writer has conquered like a Roman, and settled colonies" (342). Thoreau imagines poetic history as the necessarily partial survival of weathered monuments that remind us of the uncanny proximity of the primitive and the contemporary.

The thrill Thoreau derives from the paradoxical modernity of Homer and Ossian serves as a spur to a number of narrative attempts to register the violence of the colonial struggle with Native Americans *and* the disturbing erasure of all but fragments of this history. Thoreau's vivid retelling of Hannah Dustan's violent escape from Indian captivity is probably the best known set-piece from this text, so I will forego a detailed reading of it here. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Thoreau establishes the uncanny contemporaneity of this event through his sudden swerve into a "lyric" present tense—moving from a claim of proximity: "Early this morning, this deed was performed" (322) to merging narrative time with the time narrated. "They are thinking of the dead" (322), Thoreau insists, as Dustan and her attendants paddle back from savagery to civilization. The uncanny proximity of this event is, it turns out, best measured with a reference to a monument of poetic history: "This seems a long while ago, and yet it happened since Milton wrote his *Paradise Lost*" (324).

Even though the evidence of American barbarity is available for the reading—it is embedded in the landscape—and closer to American audiences than Milton's epic, that does not mean that such stories will succeed in getting told. Some of the most poignant passages in Thoreau's text center on the fragility of relics of prior cultures; these almost-sentient objects do not, after all, have voices of their own, leaving them, and the stories they are capable of telling, vulnerable to human indifference. Thoreau works out the practical and ethical consequences of a discontinuous history with reference to a number of mute, naturalized artifacts, such as a nail driven into an apple tree to mark the high-water level, whose warning presence is carried only in the memory of an old lady and is ignored to his peril by a railway engineer even when she confirms its existence by placing his hand on the spot (356). More disturbing

is the story of the lost burial spot of a “friendly Indian,” killed for his service to the settlers, whose grave remains unmarked and his death unmourned even after the ebbing of a flood reveals “a sunken spot, exactly of the form and size of the grave” (357).

The potential independence of such naturalized artifacts is both enormously attractive for Thoreau, and troublingly double-edged. A mode of history that can imagine indifference to its objects does not guarantee or even encourage memorialization; rather, it promotes a kind of pre-emptive adaptation to the inevitability of loss. Thoreau acknowledges that he finds absolution from “the obligation of the past” (290) in the timelessness of lyric contemplation. He is also reassured by the ways in which aesthetic objects that can accommodate their own fragmentation are shored up against loss: “A work of genius is rough-hewn from the first because it anticipates the lapse of time and has an ingrained polish which still appears when fragments are broken off, an essential quality of its substance” (376–77). In this definition of genius, the polish somehow becomes the grain; it permeates the object. Thoreau takes pleasure *not* in imagining aesthetic unity, or even the relationship of severed part to missing whole, but in contemplating the moment at which the art-object fractures: “Its beauty is at the same time its strength,” he argues, “and it breaks with a lustre” (377).

The one thing Thoreau *does not* offer us, however, in consolation for our subjection to a discontinuous history—our only intermittent sense of connection with the past—is a clear sense of location in space and time, some stable ground beneath our feet. Despite popular and critical attempts to tie this text to a particular locale or “moment” in history, *A Week* remains resolutely committed to the illocality of place, a commitment that, I would argue, is forged by and modeled on the abstraction of the commonplace. As if speaking across the ages to the many Americans who annually make pilgrimages to Walden pond in search of what exactly, I’m not sure, Thoreau attacks that “pathetic inquiry among travelers and geographers after the site of Ancient Troy. It is not where they think it is” (385). Travelers cannot find Troy—or Walden, for that matter—for it is contemporary and coincident with the act of reading. Thoreau’s provocative claim is that he, and we, are never so much at home as when we are dislocated from our historical context, a dislocation that, disturbingly, includes liberation from the ethical responsibility to remember the past: “At rare intervals we rise above the necessity of virtue into an unchangeable morning light, in which we have only to live right on and breathe ambrosial air. The *Iliad* represents no creed or opinion, and we read it with a rare sense of freedom and

irresponsibility, as if we trod on native ground and were autochthones of the soil” (369). Where is this soil? It is not where we think it is.

### Notes

1. Kenneth Lockridge argues persuasively for the use of commonplace books as evidence for intellectual and social history in *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century* (1992). See also *Milcah Martha Moore's Book*, edited by Cartherin La Courreye Blecki and Karin A. Wulf (1997), and *The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover*, edited by Kevin Berland, Jan Kirsten Gilliam, and Kenneth A. Lockridge (2001). Susan M. Stable analyzes the circulation of commonplace books among a coterie of women in *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (2004).
2. See for example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Outre-Mer, a Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* (1835) and Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (1844), reprinted in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, Jeffrey Steele, ed. (1992). True to form, in his *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (1855), William Wells Brown begins the account of his voyage out with an epigraph from Byron and folds poetry into the narrative at numerous occasions: visits to poets, homes of poets, historic sites, ordinary churchyards, ocean crossings, and a session of Parliament.
3. Emerson delivered a lecture called “Nature and Powers of the Poet” at the Concord Lyceum on 3 November 1841, and repeated it (as part of a lecture series) in Boston on 16 December 1841, in Providence on 12 February 1842, and in New York on 5 March 1842, where, critics speculate, Whitman may have heard it. A few passages from this early lecture appear in the published essay “The Poet” (*Essays, Second Series* [1844]); portions are also siphoned off into the late essay “Poetry & Imagination” (*Letters and Social Aims* [1876]). The manuscript of “Lecture III: The Poet” has been reprinted in Robert E. Spiller and Wallace E. Williams, eds, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. III (1972), 347–65.
4. Fuller published four of Thoreau's poems—“Sympathy,” “Nature doth have her dawn each day,” “Sic vita,” and “Let such pure hate still underprop”—in her two years as editor of *The Dial*. Emerson, by contrast, published eight of Thoreau's poems in the October 1842 issue, his second after taking over editorship of the journal. For the history of Thoreau's submissions to *The Dial*, see Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (1982), 113–20.
5. For Emerson and Thoreau's projected anthology, and Emerson's sponsorship of Thoreau's career as a poet, see Robert Sattelmeyer, “Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980), 239–57, and “‘When He Became My Enemy’: Emerson and Thoreau, 1848–9,” *The New England Quarterly* 62 (1989), 187–204.

6. For a detailed account of Emerson's collaboration with his daughter, Edith Emerson Forbes, in the publication of the 1874 *Parnassus*, and the importance of this volume to Emerson's late essays "Poetry and Imagination" and "Quotation and Originality" (*Letters and Social Aims*, 1876), see Ronald Bosco, "'Poetry for the World of Readers' and 'Poetry for Bards Proper': Poetic Theory and Textual Integrity in Emerson's *Parnassus*" in *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1989), 257–312.

7. See Crane's *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (1993). For the historical development and architectonics of early modern commonplace books, see also Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (1996). For some splendid examples of commonplace books throughout history, see the exhibition catalog edited by Earl Havens, *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (2001).

8. See Emerson's *Parnassus* (1875), 29. Emerson begins his excerpt from the poem with the didactic turn toward the end "I have learned/To look on Nature, not as in the hour/Of thoughtless youth" (ll. 88–89), but cuts the passage off before Wordsworth completes his string of metaphors, severing the phrase "The anchor of my purest thoughts" (l. 109) from what follows: "the nurse/The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/Of all my moral being (ll. 109–11). Numerous other poems make their way into print in conspicuously truncated form. For instance, Shelley's "To a Sky-Lark" consists of the eighth stanza only (36), while his "The Cloud" becomes a three-stanza poem, beginning with the second stanza, skipping to the fourth and then concluding with the final stanza (46–47). Tennyson's "Ode to Memory" is reprinted as "Memory" and is reduced to ten lines taken from the third stanza (92), while William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis"—marked as an excerpt in this case by the insertion of ellipses—begins with line 17, after the invocation of the "still voice" (168).

9. For Foucault's elaboration of these criteria, see "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (1984), 101–20.

10. Emerson, "Parnassus," in the Houghton Library collection, Harvard University, Houghton MS Am 1280H, 36–37.

11. For a facsimile text of Thoreau's copied over entries from Emerson's commonplace books, see Kenneth Walker Cameron, ed., *Thoreau's Literary Notebook in the Library of Congress* (1964), 53–76. For a transcription of these entries, see Cameron, *Transcendental Apprenticeship* (1976), 209–12.

12. See Grossman's *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation* (2003), especially 75–115.

13. Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays and Poems* (1983), 445–68, 465. Further references to this edition will be noted in the text.

14. For a concise treatment of the intensity and the ferment of their relationship in these years, see Sattelmeyer, "'When He Became My Enemy.'"

15. See Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1980), Carl F. Hovde et al., eds, 298. Further references to this edition will be made by page number in the text. For the canonical disavowal that Thoreau was the

inspiration for “Woodnotes,” see Edward Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1903–04), Vol. 9, 420.

16. See Thoreau, *The Illustrated A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, With Photographs from the Gleason Collection (1983), which includes a frontispiece photograph of “Thoreau’s Map of His Journey,” and Penguin’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1998), which offers a graphic illustration of the area of Thoreau’s trip. The Library of Congress catalog number for this text, F72. M7 T5, places it among US local history books, far removed numerically and, in many libraries, spatially from Thoreau’s more recognizably literary writing.

17. Robin Grey nicely captures the disruptive effect of Thoreau’s allusions: “the multiple frames of reference that are part of the allusive framework immediately suggest that the landscape he envisions is not a continuous unmediated event, but a landscape so highly mediated by literary texts and so serial that it recedes farther from him than the one he has forsaken in the present world” (108). Linck C. Johnson evaluates the role of Thoreau’s reflections on literature in the revision and expansion of the manuscript in *Thoreau’s Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1986), 163–201. Although many twentieth-century editions of *A Week* provide notes identifying the interpolated texts, it is important to recall that the first edition included no such apparatus; most of the over 400 quotations remained unidentified. William Brennan has compiled a useful list of interpolated texts, along with the likely sources from which Thoreau drew these excerpts; see “An Index to Quotations in Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1980), 259–90.

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