A Week On the Concord and Merrimac Rivers: Henry David Thoreau's Process Philosophy

Henry David Thoreau's first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers,* is rarely read today. Readers may realize that this book appears to have been written as a memorial to Thoreau's recently deceased brother (Cain 38,Walls 47) and may have been intended to be read by future readers as a sort of funeral oration.[1] The work doesn't follow the usual pattern of autobiographies, not only in that it is dedicated to Thoreau's brother rather than to himself but also in that it only covers an actual two week period of their lives. Nor does it follow the usual trend of travelogues. The work consists of eight chapters, one devoted to the rivers themselves, five and a partial to the outward bound journey and one and a partial to the return. The compression of time for the return seems to turn the reader's focus toward the voyage of discovery rather than the return to their home port, so this work appears to be directed toward future discoveries rather than upon a past trip with his brother. Chronological time seems to be unimportant. The outward portion of the voyage contains extensive digressions that present a narrative of intellectual musings rather than those of a typical travelogue involving physical, geographic discovery. Further, the book mentions neither of the brothers by name, which might be construed as depersonalizing the experience the two are shown as sharing. The reader is thus left to float the river in confusion. This paper will offer an approach to Thoreau's book that helps clarify his intent and offers ways to relate what may seem to be digressions to that intent.

From a historical perspective, the reader can see that the first draft of this book has been written approximately concurrently with *Walden,* Thoreau's far more often consulted, second published work. The first draft is started while the writer is in residence in his self-built hut adjacent to Walden pond (Cain 34, Walls 47). *A Week* becomes far more intelligible when

understood as presenting three very different kinds of excursions. This book serves as a symbolic introduction to the process philosophy of self-development which Thoreau presents more forcefully, with more detail, in *W*alden. All three voyages which are present in this book must be undertaken if we are to become fully developed citizens of our place of abode, for us to participate meaningfully in the brotherhood of that community.[2] First, we must separate ourselves from the community in which we find ourselves a member by birth. To grow and progress through the states on life's way, we must first develop mental autonomy by removing ourselves from the influences of the society in which we were raised. Our minds learn many ideas which come to us from membership in community. To become a fully developed and morally responsible individual, we must examine those ideas and determine which of them are true and compatible with our personal nature.[3] Once removed from the town we become residents in nature. As free, autonomous individuals, separated from the influences of our town, we have the chance to inventory the values we brought with us as we removed and to determine which are really of material value; which produce material necessities to preserve the body and then assess the remaining values we have brought with us to determine which of them may be necessary ethical beliefs. Once the first voyage has begun, the individual in nature has the opportunity to make a second voyage and live by the exercise of a free will, in a condition of wildness, making one's own choices. As we read his writing, Thoreau will lead us onto the third journey away from natural materialism toward spirituality. As we begin to strip away the unneeded dross and reach a state of real independence, of pure autonomy, we find ourselves entering the third state, prepared to learn to live more by spiritual goods and to become less dependent upon material goods. Thoreau's river expedition with his brother will guide us on these journeys. Physical separation may not be a formal requirement of these journeys, but they

do require mental independence which for most people may not be compatible with the duties of citizenship that fall upon those who remain resident in community.

To properly understand Thoreau's writings, we must first separate the reality of the man from the myth that we may have inherited as students. He is not the austere misanthrope who abandons his fellow citizens to take up residence in the woods and become a self-sufficient recluse. We must capture and retain the emotive Thoreau. "All the abuses which are the object of reform with the philanthropist, the statesman, and the housekeeper are unconsciously amended in the intercourse of Friends. A Friend is one who incessantly pays us the compliment of expecting from us all the virtues, and who can appreciate them in us" (Wk., Wednesday 267). Thoreau knows how to interact with his fellow travelers through life. "Between whom there is hearty truth, there is love; and in proportion to our truthfulness and confidence in one another, our lives are divine and miraculous, and answer to our ideal" (Wk., Wednesday 268). Thoreau holds himself and others to a standard of high ideals. Meeting his goals of amending social wrongs requires friendship and interaction among friends. Success required mutuality of duties and obligations, and mutual intercourse. Living in isolation in nature is only a step on life's way and not an ideal destination. At least as readers, we have a better chance of understanding a writer's work once we have made an effort to understand the writer. No matter how analytic our philosophy we must stay involved with the role emotion plays in developing our understanding.[4] "There are secret articles in our treaties with the gods, of more importance than all the rest, which the philosopher-poet can never know" (Wk., Monday 125). Quoting Chateaubriand, Thoreau notes that love of country and religion are two things which grow stronger in the emotions of mankind over time (Wk., Monday 133).

This leads to another question, are these raw emotions to be confronted as a brute fact or are they refinable? Can we learn to develop a positive emotive response to universally true law when we discover it? These questions cannot be answered yet but preparations before departure on journeys into the unknown are desirable. We must prepare ourselves to discover and recognize universal truth. Then we must examine our emotive responses to see if further training is required. If we are to be moral agents, we must love and honor higher law. Indeed, it would be best if we did so in order to help us detect universal truth when we find it. It is important for us as seekers to have the ability to respond positively to higher law.

Thoreau does not promise us easy journeys. In this book, we find Henry David Thoreau giving us a bucolic description of two men drifting with the current, flowing in the opposite direction from which he and his brother are rowing (Wk., Sunday, 48-9). In an early *Journal* entry, dated November 9, 1837, Thoreau tells us working against the flow promotes thoughts of power and grandeur while drifting where the river takes us, engages a contemplative mood that captures the muse (Broderick 10). He does not intend for us to rest upon our oars. In his review of Homer's *Iliad,* Thoreau notes "There are few books which are fit to be remembered in our wisest hours …" (Wk., Sunday, 94). Thoreau seems to suggest that reveries experienced while drifting where the current sends us are not as wise an hour as one spent pushing forward against the flow with purpose and intent. The passing boatmen have placed themselves, passively, in the hands of nature. By contract, Thoreau's process promotes an activist agenda. "He is the best sailor who can steer within the fewest points of the wind, and extract a motive power from one of the greatest obstacles. Most begin to veer and tack as soon as the wind changes from aft, and as within the tropics it does not blow from all points of the compass, there are some harbors which they can never reach" (Wk., Friday 340). Thoreau is emphasizing the necessity of developing

skill in steering our lives. For us to be able to reach our destined harbor (terminus ad quem) we need to seriously prepare.[5]

In the Monday section Thoreau describes the two brothers as resting under a tree contemplating the flow of the river, "the lapse of the river and of human life; and as that current, with its floating twigs and leaves, so did all things pass in review before us, while far away in cities in marts on this very stream, the old routine was proceeding still" (Wk., Monday 124). Here Thoreau connects nature with the townspeople, the river providing a connection for trade and commerce which was the motivating force that directed the life of the town. Town life and commerce have invaded the wild, it is no longer pristine and unaffected. Physically leaving the limits of the town is not a sufficient condition for declaring personal autonomy. The town follows us into nature; we may carry it there with us as we depart. The town may penetrate nature despite our individual efforts to escape. Thoreau notes that on the upper end of the Merrimack, near the mountains, the subsoil is sandy and in places where the sod has been broken, the sand seems to break out and cover the area around the breakout making a desert where nothing grows. As an example of what we would call environmental damage of industrialization and trade; he list suits against the railroad by persons charging them with damaging the productivity of their farms (Wk. Tuesday, 198). He notes that the progress we associate with trade and economic development can act detrimental to nature. This damage to natural beauty can also be a hinderance to the undertaking of the type of voyage Thoreau wishes to encourage, one that promotes growth of the soul during the journey.

Those who live on the shore of the rivers pursue their own general ideas, the laws of belief that direct their lives and they follow them as the river follows its flow to the sea. "But as men lived in Thebes, so do they live in Dunstable to-day" (Wk., Monday 124). These general

ideas, no matter how long these laws have remained unchanged in human history, are not the general ideas of those who would develop their personal identity, the ideas that most interest Thoreau. Although Thoreau describes this trip the brothers are taking as a beautiful experiment in natural philosophy, natural philosophy is based upon contingent truth. Contingent truth differs from mathematical truth in that the laws of science are statistical generalizations which are based upon observational evidence, and these laws may change as new observations are discovered. The truths of mathematics have been given a logical proof and are eternally true.[6] "Observation is so wide awake, and facts are being so rapidly added to the sum of human experience, that it appears as if the theorizer would always be in arrears, and was doomed forever to arrive at imperfect conclusions; but the power to perceive a law is equally rare in all ages of the world, and depends but little on the number of facts observed. The senses of the savage will furnish him with facts enough to set him up as a philosopher." (Wk., Friday 364). The higher law that Thoreau sought provided a permanent foundation for his beliefs and actions; it does not change over time.

We will revisit this in greater detail as we progress up stream, but we will note here, as we begin to consider higher laws, laws not necessarily passed by a human legislature, we will learn to distinguish natural law which does not meet Thoreau's standard of universal truth, ("Civil Disobedience" 299-300) from higher law which is universally True, which he sometimes writes with a capital letter T (see for example the early *Journal* entry dated 02/13/1838 and 08/27/1838). Despite the advances in science made during his lifetime, Thoreau does not believe that empirical science is capable of discovering the kind of higher law for which he is searching. The key to reaching the destination of our inner voyage may be found in the connections between changing nature and eternal truth for there is a connection. Laura Dassow Walls guides

us in this direction in her book *Seeing New Worlds* when she says that the reflected duality, what we see of the sky above us and the river bottom below when we look upon the river's surface, stimulates the imagination to give rise to a spiritual fact from a natural fact (Walls 48-50). Walls suggests that it is this conflict and tension between the two poles of duality that moves the process of philosophy forward. This makes the relationship between natural law and universal law complex and requires further study for Thoreau. Observing the natural world by itself will never yield a spiritual conclusion. It, alone, will not get us to universal, higher law. Imagination is the stuff of poets and philosophers and is stimulated in exploring stage two of our nature. But as has been noted, this is not the end of our journey.

A few paragraphs later Thoreau raises a poetic standard. Poets and philosophers convey their insights through language.[7] It is appropriate to consider his use of language here. The poetic standard represents the status of inquiry typical of the second state described above. The student is embedded in the physical world of nature, outside of civic life but still searching for the path that will lead to higher law and spiritual living. In discussing the criterion of truthfulness of myths, old stories in which we suspend judgment, what is intended as historical truth, in the sense of literal correspondence with material reality, is suspended and we adopt a standard which addresses imagination in search of a "higher poetical truth" (Wk., Sunday 58). Imagination begins to become important in this phase of the exploration of our internal life. In the Tuesday section Thoreau recounts a trip he had taken some time previously and his recollection he had of waking from sleep and seeing the world spread out before him in a fog from the top of Saddle-back Mountain. Everything below the top of the mountain was cloaked in fog which seemed to reveal to him what may be his future life. He felt separated from the terrestrial world. The former material reality seemed, as he wrote, to have passed away, leaving a new world of purity.

Thoreau described this as “the dazzling halls of Aurora, into which poets have had but a partial glance …” Although this glance reveals the hall of God, it is only temporary, not eternity and as he describes it passes as the morning wore on (Wk., Tuesday 189.) This is not the destination of his personal journey, but the product of imagination but imagination does reveal to him a destination that he should pursue. Frederick Garber sagely describes that mountain purity and it’s separation from the natural world by a cloud layer as a spiritual, ecstatic moment (Garber 196-98). This ecstatic moment becomes the focus of the third stage of our journey.

In the second phase we are free from social laws, still living in the default condition of wildness. Garber identifies wildness as involved with Thoreau’s interest in origins. Wildness is the position we find ourselves in at the start of our inquiry, whether we identify as a person, a nation or a culture (Garber 192). Somewhat similarly this paper finds wildness, not identified as of value in itself, but as a default condition we find ourselves in once we abandon the socially constructed values of town and community and return to an earlier, uncivilized state. We have abandoned human constructed laws and values and find ourselves subject only to physical, natural law. We are conscious of observed experience. We at first find this stimulating but incomplete. In the third interior journey we look for higher law based upon universal truth which applies to all people, in all times, in all places, rather than to our own individual condition. We shall explore this state of mind as we come to it in turn.

The first step in our inward journey of exploration is for us is to declare independence from the life of the town which prescribes the community context for acceptable moral and political values. To grow and progress through the journeys on life’s way, we must first develop mental autonomy by removing ourselves from the influences of the society in which we were raised and then begin an inventory of our beliefs. We must test them for acceptance or reject

them. This assessment is a necessary part of personal development and may be an ongoing process of refinement as we continue on to the second and third stage of life's voyage. Those residents of the town who accept values handed down to them by the covenant of church or by rule of government, the demands of religious orthodoxy and civil law, are not fully developed moral agents until they have made a judgement for themselves about these values and accepted or rejected them. We cannot be judged as moral agents until we have approved the values which we will use to determine our actions. Eventually we will desire to ground our values in something more certain then the changeable conclusions of civil or natural law. We will desire to find ground in a higher, unchangeable basis.

In the Tuesday section of his book, Thoreau describes encounters with other boatmen, pursuing their trade upon the river. He admires their freedom from social constraints and their outdoor lifestyle. Thoreau tells the reader he believes this lifestyle seems noble and poetic to other men. This enables him to consider that the poet's genius leads to a similar freedom and contentment, removed from a sense of duty or overwhelming purpose, then his imagination becomes stimulated (Wk., Tuesday 190-94). For Thoreau, imagination plays an important role in human development during this second stage of the seeker's life. He relates a story of meeting a man living in nature, free of most social constraints. He is rude and uncommunicative but when asked to give an unknown traveler shelter for the night, he so provides and offers breakfast the next morning (Wk., Tuesday 203-09). While these do not represent ideal conditions of growth, there are places in the world worthy of a temporary visit while on stage two of our moral life, where the focus of importance is upon the necessities of material life. The second step finds us resident outside the limits of society, in nature, where we begin the search for the basics of survival, material necessities to preserve the body and then continue to assess the values we have

brought with us to determine which may also be necessities of spirit. As we begin to strip away the unneeded dross and reach a state of real independence, of pure spiritual autonomy, we find ourselves entering the third state, prepared to learn to live more by spiritual goods and to become less dependent upon material goods. Entering step three requires the most preparation, and the stimulation of imagination. Until that point is achieved what deserves the most attention and is the conclusion of this process, is the abandonment of materialism. This search for a higher truth brings to mind Thoreau' s search for higher laws, laws which are universally true for all people in all times and places and therefore are more important than the contingent laws produced by civil society and natural laws based upon changeable, empirical observation. What is desired are laws which are not based upon a mere founding document, articles of association based upon eternal truths rather than upon contingent political compromise. Thoreau tells his readers of a parable of two walkers who tried to persuade the brothers to take them as passengers. When the brothers declined to do so the walkers started to follow them until they were themselves stopped by a creek that delayed their further passage. This led to a laconic comment by Thoreau that nature was indifferent to the walker's needs while at other times she provided service to others like themselves who had properly prepared to receive that service. Then he continued by saying "[T]he secret of her service is her unchangeableness (Wk., Sunday 114)". Nature is indifferent to the desires of men and to use her services we must adapt to her intentions. Our purposes too often are contingent, variable, based upon the perceived needs of the particular circumstances of the moment. To find universal truth we must avoid mischaracterizing the laws of nature by forcing them to conform to our needs. We are not intended to adopt a passive acceptance of material reality, natural laws that drive material reality, but rather to find universal laws which may guide our own actions as well as those of others. Readers must then explore what this new

standard may entail. As a compass pointer we should consider Laura Dassow Walls' observation that, after reading Coleridge, Thoreau repeatedly talks of duality in the phenomenal world, a water sighting may reflect the sky above the observer at the same time as the observer is noting the muddy bottom of river or pond. She understands these dialogues as presenting either/or themes of natural facts and spiritual awareness (Walls 48-49). For Walls this doubleness, Thoreau's word, is not antagonistic but rather presents both features of our consciousness as always present for us to select based upon the observer's intentions or purposes. Or it may be read as a state of consciousness depending upon the state of life's way the observer may have obtained at the point of the observation. "Recalling Emerson in *Nature*, the longer Thoreau disavows and dissolves the merely material world in favor of another higher realm, the more intensely does he turn to reclaim and rehabilitate his earthly mother" (Walls 50). We may read this as a charge against Thoreau for lacking commitment to spiritual values. While still caught up in the dynamics of the natural world, we have not yet mastered the spiritual nature of our souls and have not yet developed the strength of will to live by the higher laws when we find them. There is more journey to undertake.

A good description of the mental state of stage three can be found in the Wednesday chapter. "We are grateful when we are reminded by interior evidence of the permanence of universal laws; for our faith is but faintly remembered, indeed, is not a remembered assurance, but rather a use and enjoyment of knowledge. It is when we do not have to believe but come into actual contact with Truth, and are related to her in the most direct and intimate way (Wk., Wednesday 238)." Belief is only required when we are not assured of truth, and we find it when we move on from empirically justified natural laws to spiritual laws which we find as part of our eternal souls when we begin to undertake the internal journey and reduce our dependance upon

material existence as much as we possibly can. These eternal laws are fronted to us as essential facts, interior perceptions that are a fundamental part of reality. We no longer need belief when we are confronted by true and certain knowledge of universal law.

In the Thursday chapter of *A Week*, Thoreau offers us a metaphor describing his fellow travelers as being shallow. Rather than discovering new ground like the founders, the current generation lives on the surface of life:

> The frontiers are not east and west, north or south; but wherever a man *fronts* a fact, though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and *it*. Let him build himself a log house with the bark on where he is, *fronting IT*, and wage there an Old French war for seven or seventy, with Indians and Rangers, or whatever else may come between him and the reality, and save his scalp if he can. (Wk., Thursday 304)

We, of course, save our scalp by staying at home confronting our inner reality. While this may be read as expressing a conflict between the inward reality of a spiritual soul and an external world of things, Jane Bennett would read this as a war of inner personal identity contending with external objects as something which should be understood as things in themselves rather than as tools for use of human agents (Bennett, *Seeing 52*). This imports too much metaphysics, perhaps from Hegel, which readers who prefer to slice close to the bone of Thoreau's writings, would do well to avoid. Hegel was a social philosopher who presented world views of society as conflicting with alternative world views until this conflict synthesized a new world view that becomes the defining reality of society, for a time. For Thoreau the internal voyage is an individual exploration of discovery of eternal laws that exist for all persons, in all places, at all times. This is a learning process which takes place one person at a time and until a new stage of development takes

precedence over the current one when the third stage is reached and becomes a conscious part of the explorer's life and personal awareness.

Thoreau closely attended the major religious movements in his attempt to find universal truth. In his review of Christian theology, Thoreau finds there is no poetry in it which he associates with harmless dreaming, no wise speculation, "nothing regarded as the light of beauty merely, but moral truth is its object. All mortals are convicted by its conscience" (Wk., Monday 137). Hindoo scripture is identified only as pure intellectuality. The *New Testament* is identified by its pure morality (Wk., Monday 137-38). Thoreau finds, citing Warren Hastings' translation and commentary upon the Bhagavat Ghita, that eastern attention to abstract contemplation attained a separation from the senses and materiality (137-38). This strikes a chord with Thoreau's attention to spirituality as consciousness prior to material nature. Natural history and beauty are rejected as inadequate, they lead only to contingent truth, not universal, moral truth. Eastern religion leads to abstract theology and does not instruct us in living in ways that promote the solution to problems of life, like the ending of slavery supported by the fugitive salve law.

"Some of these sublime sentences, as the Chaldean oracles of Zoroaster, still surviving after a thousand revolutions and translations, alone make us doubt if the poets form and dress are not transitory, and not essential to the most effective and enduring expression of thought "(Wk., Monday 143). There is value in the quality of expressions themselves in the transmission of human ideas across the span of history. But how many accidents of history have extinguished the transmission of a true idea? Is history a reliable repository of Truth? We know, of course, that historians selectively focus upon facts and provide their own interpretation of those facts. Details which past historians may have identified as significant may have faded into oblivion or may not have been recorded because they were not thought of as worthy of preservation in their day of

creation or in the passing of days until today. Many of the observations and feelings of former poets may have been expressed in words which have seen their meanings changed since they were written. The record of our personal experience in the immediacy of the present may be a more reliable source. Stanley Bates describes Thoreau's philosophy as perfectionism, a search for certainty of moral values as a processes of self-understanding achieved by finding a source of value that locates our personal identity in God's plan which is independent of empirical understanding (Schneewind 169). Thoreau's view can be summarized as finding civil law to be based upon other legal, originating documents such as our Constitution which are not based upon eternal views. Nor in natural philosophy or science which is based upon empirical evidence and will be subject to change whenever new data are observed which will not be explainable in the then existing model of the scientific world view. Thoreau's search is for higher law which is eternally true and the only part of human experience that directly reveals that which is eternal is the soul. Phenomenal time is not the friend of eternal truth: "Every sacred book, successively, has been accepted in the faith that it was to be the final resting-place of the sojourning soul; but after all, it was but a caravansary which supplied refreshment to the traveler, and directed him farther on his way to Isphahan Bagdat" (Wk., Monday 148 Thoreau's spelling).Thoreau has been searching ancient writings looking for truth that has been preserved over the years unchanged as food for the imagination which will power us along upon our own search:

> 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 most remarkable fact which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing, or in some way forget or dispense with. - (Wk., Monday 173-74)

Idle time gads along leaving the voyagers alone because time, from the perspective of eternity, is insignificant. From the perspective of eternity all chronological events are included already, and eternity, in its totality, never changes. Time as a measurement of change therefore has no universal meaning. Eternity is everlasting and is not created by mortal man, it provides universal truth to us once we access eternity. Eternity can only be accessed through the soul since our soul is the only part of human life which possesses eternal existence. If we are to find Truth to use in guiding our lives, it must be universal, apply to all people in all places at all times, otherwise we are fallible people guiding our choices on the basis of fallible, changeable rules which may not meet the standard for truth which we need in order to live well. Once we have found these truths written upon our soul by our creator, since we have direct access to them, there can be no mistake for us other than in the finding.

Time is among the contingencies that Thoreau would eschew. Eternal truth is not subject to chronological changes. “Time measures nothing but itself” (Wk., Thursday 312). The wise man, the seeker of eternal, universal truth is outside time because the eternal soul does not change, truth does not change. “The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time, the cunning mind travels further back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation” (Wk., Thursday 311-12). The wise man speaks extemporaneously since he is on the track of eternal truth that is

unchanging, if he speaks at all he will speak truly so planning would be unnecessary. If we haven't yet obtained universal knowledge, then we will at least learn from our mistakes.

Thoreau distinguishes between chronological time which we experience phenomenologically and gives insight as to why it is not related to universal truth. The only part of human experience which survives the death of the body is the eternal soul. Eternity is not experienced phenomenologically but can only be accessed through an interior journey we may call meditation. This is a passive state of experience which we must pursue in tranquility if we are to hear the quiet voice that issues from the soul. It includes not just our sensual experience, but we find the experience of its creator there. Since eternity includes the sum total of all of time, the notion of phenomenal units of time no longer apply. And we do not discover the experience bit by bit, although we may discover it in small, partial glimpses as we grow. We can only comprehend it when we become able to experience the totally of what we become capable of discovering. We experience change as we see the sun move throughout the day and as we remember past events. We read of past events in the pages of history books. Romans went to Greece in search of wisdom but both Greece and Rome are gone. Thoreau gives us the historical example of an account of Indian captivity that took place 142 years before his time, but we can only read the written word and gain no further information. The information implanted upon our eternal souls is there for us in our present immediacy; we can inquire of it now or whenever we wish, and it is not limited by contingent changes (Wk., Thursday 313-25). After considering eastern thought, Thoreau rejects it in favor of *New Testament* beliefs considering eastern philosophy insufficiently pragmatic. "The Brahman never proposes courageously to assault evil, but patiently to starve it out" (Wk., Monday 140). Seeking asylum in wisdom will never justify Arjoon (Thoreau's spelling) to fight. No doubt Thoreau has in mind, but does not call out here, the problem in America of slavery and the fugitive

slave law, enacted by democracy against the instructions he finds imbedded in conscience. While eastern philosophy may contain pure virtue, Krishna and Arjoon may still be in discussion and contemplation after four thousand years. Though Thoreau may not be thinking about John Brown yet, Brown will soon come asking for dollars and arms and will take those promptly to Harper's Ferry. Though Thoreau may prefer civil disobedience, after this revolt is crushed, he will begin to reconsider the role of force in the face of inaction. Bennett acknowledges that Thoreau's political writings and speeches place him within the public sphere that he rejects (10). Thoreau clearly prefers individual reform to mass movements which are more likely to go wrong than follow the correct path. Readers, however, should realize that this criticism does not demonstrate an unresolvable contradiction. After we have withdrawn from civic society and begun the process of discovering our personal genius, we have already begun to build our protective shield against social control as we begin to develop wisdom from our own resources. Bennett seems to believe that Thoreau is exaggerating the power of imagination in building a resistance to what she calls "normalization" (11). The reader should here consider that the philosopher may well discover a sense of duty to return to the cave as Plato describes. Thoreau's refusal to pay the small poll tax while living at Walden seems to support this conclusion of a duty to both return and not participate in what is against any newly found principles. The interplay of imagination on conscience cannot be discounted here as a life altering experience.

Here is another lens through which we might examine Emerson and Thoreau upon the broader issue of spirituality:

> I must conclude that Conscience, if that be the name of it, was not given us for no purpose, or for a hinderance. However flattering order and expediency may look, it is but the repose of a lethargy …. 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? The expedients of the nations clash with one another: only the absolutely right is expedient for all. (Wk., Monday 133-34)

One might conclude that one of the secret treaties we make with God has to do with obeying the imperatives of conscience. In the next paragraph Thoreau describes Antigone as obeying the command of her god to scatter sand upon the body of her dead brother in defiance of the law of King Creon's command forbidding this right (Wk., Monday 134-35). Thoreau's literary and philosophical mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, has written an early essay, "Self-Reliance" which treated the responses of conscience as subjective impressions, giving them the same epistemological status as sense impressions, that is, as natural facts.[5] This seems to leave the status of conscience unresolved. Are the impulses of conscience subjective impressions that are brute facts or is conscience something that can be modified by free will and emotional development? Antigone's defiance of King Creon might be understood as defending a socially held value in defiance of arbitrary power or it might be considered as defending an absolute right of a believer's understanding of religious obligation. It is hard for us to know the real motivations of Antigone's personal experience. When Thoreau relocated to Walden Pond, he did so to free himself from all the training and pressures exerted upon him by town life so as to explore his beliefs and values, to find what were his real values and determine how he should live his life. While we are contemplating this subject, it is worth our while to meditate upon the consequent personal declaration of independence from socially constructed norms. Conformity to civic norms may not be compatible with developing autonomous values. It requires significant effort to remove ourselves from conditioned lives. Thoreau does this by cultivating "a will to wildness"

(Bennett 3-5). To remain in the community while reforming oneself leaves the seeker caught in the crucible of civic politics. Seeking reform, social justice, involves using socially acceptable arguments to mobilize popular support. The logic of democratic governance itself promotes dependence and thwarts self-actualization. Withholding one's participation with injustice and achieving freedom is a lifetime process (6-9). During his first months at the pond while he is clearing and planting his acre and a half field and building his minimalist home, Thoreau tells us he learned nothing about life and belief (W. Higher Laws para 1 175-80).[6] He also tells us when he first came to the pond, he admired hunters but came to change his mind about that and turned to vegetarianism. We can see that his ideas and world view were evolving during his stay. And we know that during that stay Thoreau had produced his first draft of *A Week* and later that he substantially changes that draft. He thus documents the process of change of belief and his evolution of an independent plan of action as a developmental processes.

As readers, we do realize this presentation is more analytically organized than the writings which Henry David has crated. But he gives permission to use his efforts as we find appropriate. In the Sunday section Thoreau drops what may be a hint to the reader. The best books he tells us are those which have purposes not made explicit by the writer. He gives Virgil as an example saying that Virgil's writing serves a very different purpose for Thoreau in his then present life than Virgil's writing did for Vergil's contemporaries (Wk., Sunday 90). This invites us to use Thoreau's writings differently from what Thoreau may have intended and, not intending to misrepresent his thoughts, if this presentation does differ it is not a tragic thing to explore implicit matters with his written permission.

In this book Thoreau presents to us a travelogue of the brothers' river excursion, provides us with an honorium for his brother and invites us to be fellow travelers on an internal voyage of our own. The transitions are only presented in outline and the analysis is not systematized since if each voyager is using the voyager's personal pilot as a guide, the borders of the stages of these voyages will vary. The third stage is here left incomplete since Thoreau's stay at the pond was unfinished at the point in his life when he started his writing. Understanding is a continuous process of development. He gives us an outline of the stages through which we will progress if we are to complete our own voyage. *Bon Voyage.*

Notes

1.The classic interpretation of this work as an elegy for John Thoreau is Linck C. Johnson's *Thoreau's Complex Weave,* especially chapter 2, pp. 41-84. Johnson develops his interpretation beginning with Thoreau's poem "Brother where dost thou dwell?" in which Thoreau begins the search for John's ideal spirit in nature.

2. Rebecca Kneale Gould presents an interesting interpretation of Thoreau's work as representing what she describes as a four destination journey of integrated themes in her "Reading Thoreau in the 21st Century: Whither and Why?" which is well worthing reading. She considers Thoreau's religious and political concerns in relation to contemporary black writers. Also of interest is Lydia Willsky-Cillo's deep dive into the relation of Thoreau's religious philosophy of Indigenous American culture and beliefs, "Apostles of Wilderness: American Indians and Thoreau's Theology of the Wild."

3. Michael Frederick gives an excellent account of Thoreau's cohort and of the background of American Transcendentalism in his essay "Transcendental Ethos: A Study of Thoreau's Social Philosophy and Its Consistence in Relation to Antebellum Reform".

4. The role of emotion in completing our understanding is an important feature of Transcendentalism. Philip Guar's *American Transcendentalism* is the classical account of the historical development of the movement between 1830 to 1850. Chapter 4 may be a good place for readers to start.

5. For another example of Thoreau's use of symbols to represent the relationship of humans to nature see Johnson, "Historical Introduction", 1980, p. 340.

6. A standard definition for a brute fact would be a perception that cannot be defined in terms of something more fundamental. For an empiricist, the perception of a color can constitute a

brute fact. It is here suggested that a subjective perception such as an emotive response, for example what we may describe as conscience, should be considered a brute fact. For the statement of objective and subjective perceptions, see Emerson's essay "The Preacher," "We are in transition, from the worship of the fathers which enshrined the law in a private and personal history, to a worship which recognizes the true eternity of the law, its presence to you and me, its equal energy in what is called brute nature as in what is called sacred. The next age will behold God in the ethical laws —as mankind begins to see them in this age, self-equal, self-executing…" (222- 23) This appears to break up the subjective – objective distinction and characterize the experience of conscience for example, as a perception of human nature just as the other external sense perceptions are parts of nature as experienced by humans. This unification of internal and external perceptions gives significance to the search for higher law in nature (see Johnson 133). Jonathan Bishop takes this development a step further concluding that, for Thoreau, the joining of nature and human nature results in a super nature, designated as Nature. This conjoining of nature and human mind creates a reality more objective than the separation of these two states of being (Bishop 69).

7. There has been a lot of discussion about the ability of words to convey the higher law and the manner in which philosophy and poetry can derive meaning through nature. Christopher Dustin's essay "Voicing Silence" explores this in detail and is worth consulting.

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