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Transcendental Higher Learning: Emerson, Thoreau and the Idea of Liberal Arts

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An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

Transcendental Higher Learning: Emerson, Thoreau and the Idea of Liberal Arts

By Joseph M. Johnson

Henry Thoreau's philosophy of education was more actively political than scholars have previously recognized. *Transcendental Higher Learning* begins by telling the story of Thoreau's dramatic reading of poetry and ancient classics at the radical abolitionist John Brown's memorial service in Concord on December 2, 1859. I return to this moment, which I interpret as the culmination of Thoreau's lifelong political engagement with higher learning, in chapter four. Thoreau's theory of books and reading was grounded in the antebellum classical college and looked forward, at the same time, to progressive theories of liberal arts that continue to shape the way we talk about higher education today.

Chapter one shows how Emerson's view of the American scholar grew out of the romantic roots of the nineteenth-century classical college as well. Thoreau's theory of higher learning emerged as a variety of Harvard new humanism, filtered through Emerson and Harvard classicists like Cornelius Conway Felton, Thoreau's undergraduate professor of Greek. Chapters two and three argue that the only two book-length works Thoreau published in his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854), can be interpreted as an extension of Thoreau's undergraduate course of classical studies. Thoreau's educational vision evolved throughout his major works. He started with a conception of books and learning as a form of antimaterialism, a pursuit that has the power to challenge the reign of antebellum business and industrial society. Toward the end of his life, after the publication of *A Week* and *Walden*, Thoreau developed a stronger sense of liberal arts education as a vehicle for literary and civil disobedience. In 1859, Thoreau saw higher learning not as a private or passive pursuit but as a public and active political performance.

Transcendental Higher Learning argues that Thoreau's mature view of education, as he practiced it at John Brown's memorial service in Concord on December 2, 1859, can help us better understand transcendentalist *as* an education movement. Thoreau's mature philosophy of higher learning as a progressive countercultural activity can help reanimate our own theory and practice of liberal arts in the twenty-first century as well.

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This dissertation is humbly dedicated to Rose Elizabeth, whose lively energy has made me happier than she will probably ever know. May you always read, my little Rosebud,with as wide an eye and open heart as you do now! I love you!

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Introduction

Half-Way to Thermopylae

Shortly after two o'clock on the afternoon of December 2, 1859, Henry Thoreau stood up to address a capacity audience at Concord Town Hall twenty miles west of Boston, Massachusetts. The occasion was a solemn one. The radical abolitionist John Brown had been executed in the state of Virginia only hours before, following a speedy trial and sentencing for his role as leader of a slave revolt at Harpers Ferry in October.[1] Thoreau and the transcendentalists gathered at Concord Town Hall to commemorate the man they claimed as their own modern-day "saint" and "martyr."[2] Thoreau had been

[1] On the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown led twenty-one men, including five African Americans, on a raid that seized the federal armory and rifle works at Harpers Ferry in Virginia. Brown's plan was to seize weapons, arm local slaves, and then lead a broader revolt that would cut a path through the heart of the American South. Brown's force of twenty-one men were surrounded at Harpers Ferry, however, and after a brief fight on October 18, Brown was captured by federal troops under the leadership of Colonel Robert E. Lee. Federal troops killed ten of Brown's men, including two of his sons. Two federal troops were also killed. Brown was charged with treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia, multiple first-degree murders, and inciting a slave insurrection. He was found guilty on November 2 and hanged a month later, on December 2, 1859. The account of Brown's raid that I have found most useful is David Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Vintage, 2005). Reynolds's thesis is reflected in his subtitle: Brown helped kill slavery by sparking the Civil War, initiating the long march toward civil rights for African-Americans in the United States. Other accounts I have found useful include John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), which situates John Brown as a political thinker, and Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence, & the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), which helps explain the role of Brown's martyrdom in the visual and literary rhetoric of the Civil War.

[2] *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. XVIII, *Journal XII* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 448-49. Further citations to the 1906 Walden edition of Thoreau's

planning for weeks. "When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours (especially to-day) to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave," Thoreau wrote in his journal on October 19, "what a merely brute, or worse than brute, force it is seen to be! A demoniacal force! It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules" (*JXII*, 400).[3]

Thoreau fumed in the days and weeks leading up to John Brown's memorial service in Concord. He was outraged by the negative public response to events at Harpers Ferry. "The Republican editors," Thoreau writes, "obliged to get their sentences ready for the morning edition, — and their dinner ready before afternoon, — speak of . . . [Captain Brown and his] men, not in a tone of admiration for their disinterestedness and heroism, not of sorrow even for their fate, but calling them 'deluded fanatics,' 'mistaken men,' 'insane,' or 'crazed'" (*JXII*, 406-7). Such cowards "know very well on which side their bread is buttered!" (*JXII*, 407). Thoreau describes Captain Brown, in stark contrast, as "A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, a Transcendentalist above all, a man of ideals and principles — that was what distinguished him" (*JVIII*, 420). To Thoreau, Brown is a man "of unwavering purposes," one who cannot "be dissuaded but

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journal will be made within the text accompanied by the abbreviation *J*, followed by the appropriate journal volume and page numbers.

John Brown's formal funeral took place in North Elba, New York, on December 8, 1859. Thoreau and the transcendentalists conceived the memorial service they planned for Brown in Concord on December 2 as a symbolic burial service, a ceremony that doubled as a protest event. For an account of John Brown's funeral in North Elba, see Reynolds, 400.

[3] Thoreau first received news of Harpers Ferry while visiting the home of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson responded with a look of grave silence, according to Bronson Alcott's report. Thoreau, on the other hand, seemed immediately poised and ready for action. See Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (1962; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 416; Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Personality of Emerson* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1903), 87-88.

by an experience and wisdom greater than his own" (*JVIII*, 420). Captain Brown did not "yield to a whim or transient impulse, but carr[ied] out the purpose of life" (*JVIII*, 420).

By November Thoreau turned his hard words into action. He helped organize a meeting to drum up support for the memorial service at Concord Town Hall on December 2.[4] "I looked into the Church of England liturgy, printed near the beginning of the last century, to find a service applicable to the case of Captain Brown," Thoreau writes in his journal. "The only martyr recognized and provided for by it was King Charles the First!! Of all the inhabitants of England and of the world, he was the only one whom that church made a martyr and saint of!! And now for more than half a century it had celebrated his martyrdom by an annual service! What a satire on the church is that!" (*JXII*, 448-49). Thoreau abandoned the Church of England liturgy on December 2. He planned his own

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[4] Harding, 420. "No one shaped the John Brown image more strongly than did the Transcendentalists," writes David Reynolds (214). "The admiration of him laid the basis for the later widespread deification of him in the North" (214). Reynolds argues that the relationship between the transcendentalists and John Brown "is an untold story of Civil War history. For a long time historians maintained that the Transcendentalists had little connection with antislavery reform and did not factor in the background of the war" (214-15). Yet "had the Transcendentalists not sanctified the arch-Abolitionist John Brown, he might have very well remained an obscure, tangential figure — a forgettable oddball. And had that happened, the suddenly intense polarization between the North and South that followed Harpers Ferry might not have happened" (215). Reynolds argues that sectarian polarization following Harper Ferry led to the outbreak of the American Civil War. The transcendentalists' memorial service for John Brown at Concord Town Hall on December 2, 1859 played a key role in their sanctification of Captain John Brown. The service is part of the much larger narrative of conflict over slavery and race that Reynolds articulates. The literature on the transcendentalists' engagement with race and slavery is vast. The works I have found most helpful include: Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (1995; repr., Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 218-74; Philip F. Gura, *The American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 209-66; Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999). See also Michael T. Gilmore, *The War on Words: Slavery, Race, and Free Speech in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-74. For a perspective that is deeply critical of the transcendentalists, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

holy service instead. Thoreau designed John Brown's memorial service as a symbolic burial ceremony — a literary protest event. Following a prayer and hymn at Concord Town Hall on December 2, just hours after John Brown's execution in Virginia, Thoreau stood up and spoke:

> when I now look over my commonplace book of poetry, I find that the best of it is oftenest applicable, in part of wholly, to the case of Captain Brown. Only what is true, and strong, and solemnly earnest, will recommend itself to our mood at this time. Almost any noble verse may be read, either as his elegy or eulogy, or be made the text of an oration on him. Indeed, such are now discovered to be the parts of a universal liturgy, applicable to those rare cases of heroes and martyrs for which the ritual of no church has provided. This is the formula established on high — their burial service — to which every great genius has contributed its stanza or line.[5]

As part of his invocation, Thoreau read several passages of modern poetry, including Marvell, Raleigh, Collins, Schiller, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Chapman, and Wotton. He saved the ancient classics for last. Thoreau concluded his introductory remarks on December 2 by reading a translation from the ancient historian Tacitus.

Several speakers addressed the audience after Thoreau. The ceremony concluded with a dirge sung to piano accompaniment. Emerson read the words of John Brown himself, and Alcott — rather predictably — read from the dialogues of Plato. Thoreau's "universal liturgy" nonetheless stands out as a kind of foundation stone. His reading of poetry and the classics shaped the "mood" of the moment. Yet what made the text of

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[5] A transcript of the December 2 memorial service for John Brown was first published under the title "Services in Concord" in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, ed. James Redpath (1860; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 437-54. Thoreau's opening remarks begin on page 439 of this edition. Thoreau's comments on December 2 are also printed, without the rest of the funeral proceedings, under the title "Martyrdom of John Brown," in Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 418-421. Henceforward citations will appear in the body of my dissertation, accompanied by the short-title "Martyrdom" and page numbers corresponding to the Library of America edition of the text.

Tacitus so "applicable to the case of Captain Brown"? Why would Thoreau have read an ancient text at such a defining modern moment, as the United States hurtled toward the height of sectional crisis and the outbreak of the civil war?

The following dissertation offers an answer. Thoreau's "universal liturgy," his reading of poetry and the classics on December 2, 1859, opens a window into his broader view of education as a vehicle for social critique and democratic reform. Thoreau learned to read books, especially the ancient classics, as a quasi-religious pursuit — an imaginative activity with far-reaching social and political consequences. When he stood up to address his audience at John Brown's memorial service in Concord, Thoreau deployed books and learning as a weapon. He deployed "higher" learning as a tool in his ongoing battle to remake American society along more justly humanist, egalitarian grounds. This dissertation argues that Thoreau's theory of books and reading grew out of the romantic roots of the antebellum classical college. His idea of education looks forward, at the same time, to progressive theories of teaching and learning that continue to shape the way we talk about liberal arts and the role of humanities in the American college and university today.

My approach will no doubt surprise readers. Most will recall Thoreau's famously dismissive remarks about his own classical college education. Despite his criticism of Harvard, Thoreau remained in dialogue with principles of new humanist teaching and learning that he imbibed while a student in Cambridge from 1833-1837. First and foremost, Thoreau viewed education — specifically, liberal arts education — as a vehicle for self-cultivation and social reform. He conceived "higher" learning as a way to

improve the self and transform American society. So did Emerson. The Concord writers built upon — extended, reworked, revised — the educational ideas of their own Harvard College professors and mentors. Any reading of transcendentalism as an education movement must begin with the culture of Harvard classicism, as it challenged and inspired the transcendentalists, who conceived themselves as new humanist teachers and scholars with important views to be heard by the American public.

The idea that "higher" learning, grounded in the ancient classics, has the power to "combat such cancers of modernity as materialism, civic decay, industrialization, and anti-intellectualism" developed throughout the early nineteenth century in the United States.[6] Antebellum Harvard was a hotbed for innovative teaching and learning, or what Caroline Winterer calls "new humanist" higher education reform. Although transcendentalism is often understood as a reaction against the corpse-cold academic and intellectual culture at Harvard College in the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson, Thoreau, and the transcendentalists were caught up in a revitalization of classical learning that took

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[6] Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 4. Winterer's book is the single best source for studying the social, cultural, and political context of Thoreau's classical education. See especially 44-117. See also Caroline Winterer, *The Classics and Culture in the Transformation of American Higher Education, 1830-1890* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1996), 1-131. Other works of cultural and intellectual history that I have found useful include Carl J. Richard, *The Golden Age of The Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009) and *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994); James Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014). These sources, especially the scholarship of Winterer and Turner, have not yet been accounted for by historians of transcendentalism. They tell the story of a much more vibrant culture of classical teaching and learning, especially within the antebellum American college, than has been previously recognized. I have not found any sources that apply this scholarship to the transcendentalists' view of education and reading.

place throughout greater Boston, beginning with the appointment of Edward Everett (1794-1865) as Harvard's first Eliot Chair of Greek Literature in 1814.[7] Edward Everett was Emerson's favorite college professor. Everett and his colleagues, especially Cornelius Conway Felton (1807-1862), Thoreau's undergraduate professor of Greek, worked to infuse the American classical college curriculum with a strong dose of European style new humanism.[8] Building on a structure of classical learning already available in the United States, in short, Everett, Felton, and the Harvard classicists portrayed the study of Greek and Latin as a gateway for creative and critical thought —

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[7] Richardson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995), 11-17. Everett was appointed as the first Eliot Chair of Greek Literature by Harvard President (and Emerson family friend) John Kirkland, who sent Everett to study in Germany and bring the most recent methods of new humanist critical and historical scholarship back with him to the halls of Harvard. "Central to Germany's New Humanism was an infatuation with was an infatuation with the art, literature, and other achievements of ancient Greeks," writes Caroline Winterer (*The Culture of Classicism*, 51). "Although the Romans had been essential in transmitting the remnants of Greek culture to the modern era through transcriptions of texts and copies of sculpture, eighteenth-century German philhellenes looked beyond these facts to find in ancient Greece a quasi-religious realm of the beautiful and the true. Admiration for ancient Greece was part of a cultural revolt against a sterile Augustan classicism, religious oppression, fussy baroque decor, and aristocratic control. Perceiving a relationship between ancient Greece and modern Germany in an ideal world of literature, art, and philosophy, German philhellenes sought to revive a Greek 'spirit' (*Geist*) in modern Germany. Hellenism pervaded many aspects of German thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, animating the literary efforts of Goethe (1749-1832) and G. E. Lessing (1729-81) and the aesthetic philosophy of J. G. Herder (1744-1803) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)" (51). Everett immersed himself in the cultural and intellectual milieu of romantic new humanism — and carried it back to Harvard, along with a newly minted Ph.D. from the University of Gottingen, in 1820. Three other Americans who studied at Gottingen (and also had connections to the transcendentalists) include George Bancroft (1800-1891), George Ticknor (1791-1871), and Joseph Green Cogswell (1786-1871). See *The Culture of Classicism*, 52.

[8] Cornelius Felton did not study in Germany but imbibed the spirit of European new humanism during his undergraduate days at Harvard. Felton was a student of Edward Everett. The best account of Felton's teaching is Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 44-98 and *The Classics and Culture*, 47-130.

the very core of liberal arts education. Harvard humanists portrayed the ancient classics as a strong foundation "broad-gauged, widely diffused learning."[9] They valued a style of "thoughtful intellectual wandering" that melded Unitarian concepts of self-culture with romantic theories of education as organic growth.[10] Emerson, Thoreau, and the

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[9] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19. Winterer describes the intellectual milieu throughout New England around the year 1830 as follows: "this was a society persuaded that the reasonable human mind, fashioned by a reasonable Architect, could discern the essential unity and knowability of the world. The realm of knowledge was believed to be within the grasp of every person. This belief did not stem from a paucity of knowledge; on the contrary, the frontiers of knowledge by 1800 were already remote, the plenitude of learning beyond the grasp of any one person. Nevertheless, educated Americans persisted in roaming unimpeded through the reaches of their universe. Such broad-gauged, widely diffused learning was called 'general knowledge.' The physical evidence of this thoughtful intellectual wandering is clear in such publications as the North American Review, founded in 1815, which laid before its readership a broad array of essays and reviews" (18-19). The idea of "broad-gauged, widely diffused learning" and "thoughtful intellectual wandering" perfectly captures Henry Thoreau's approach to books and reading. This "sort of broadly learned reading common to the early nineteenth century," according to Winterer, was grounded in the study of ancient Greek and Latin classics (21). Winterer builds on Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988). "The Unitarian moralists who are the subjects of this study," Howe writes, "were by no means oblivious to the need for [educational] improvements at Harvard. When George Bancroft, George Ticknor, and Edward Everett returned to Europe with ideas for changing the College, they found sympathetic listeners on the faculty" — especially among the moral philosophers. See Howe, 264. Harvard Moral philosophy meshed well with the romantic and new humanist idea of education as moral and intellectual growth.

[10] As Winterer explains, the concept of "*being Greek*" captures antebellum Americans' "faith in the profoundly self-transforming abilities of classical study" (*The Culture of Classicism*, 82). "By surrendering the modern self and entering into the spirit of antiquity through the study of texts placed in their broad historical context, American students might also become Greek and so resist the seduction of materialism and machines. [Cornelius] Felton, for example, urged his students actually 'be Demosthenes' by properly pronouncing their ancient Greek" (82). "Being Greek in antebellum America was thus a form of cultivation or self-culture," Winterer continues. "Cultivating students was a new pedagogical goal that emerged in the context of troubling economic changes that demoted classical learning in favor of utilitarian knowledge. The words culture and cultivation derived originally from agriculture, and in the antebellum era they retained their associations in the language of faculty psychology with the development of things

transcendentalists learned to read, in this context, with tremendous imaginative energy. Harvard classicists taught their students to read with the creative energy of a romantic poet. By entering fully into the spirit of the classics, they believed, American students will emerge transformed.

Sympathetic, wide and eager reading is the first core principle of Thoreau's philosophy of education. Emerson also viewed creative reading as a quasi-religious activity, a form of imaginative travel that was grounded in the study of world literature and ancient classics. Like the Harvard new humanists, Emerson and Thoreau conceived "higher" learning not just as a tool for self-improvement but also as a weapon for social criticism. Historians have not fully traced this connection, probably because the transcendentalists drew strength from Harvard new humanism even as they challenged, disparaged, and adapted it.[11] When John Albee (1833-1915), a young Harvard man and aspiring poet, for example, visited Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1852, Thoreau was also present. Thoreau "gave negative and biting criticisms, especially in regard to education

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that grew, from plants to human minds" (82). It is easy to see how the concept of "being Greek" would be attractive to Unitarians and the transcendentalists, as it was so close to William Ellery Channing's philosophy of self-culture. "Cultivating the self and studying the culture of the Greeks," Winterer concludes, "became synonymous with following a path of inward perfection distinct from chasing Mammon" (83).

[11] In *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988), Robert Richardson offers a useful account of Thoreau's classical education. Harding, 32-51 is also helpful, though, as mentioned below, Harding does not take into account Thoreau's radical reworking of his own classical college education. Ethel Seybold, *Thoreau: the Quest and the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951) is still valuable, as a source that exhaustively traces Thoreau's use of the classics in his published writing. But Seybold's work is now long outdated. Slightly more up-to-date, though still lacking in terms of social and political context, is Kevin P. Van Anglen's introduction to *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Translations*, ed. Van Anglen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

and educational institutions," according to Albee's report.[12] "As soon as I could I introduced the problem I came to propound — what course a young man must take to get the best kind of education," Albee writes. "Emerson pleaded always for the college . . . . This aroused the wrath of Thoreau, who would not allow any good to the college course. And here it seemed to me that Emerson said things on purpose to draw Thoreau's fire and amuse himself. When the curriculum at Cambridge was alluded to, and Emerson casually remarked that most of the branches were taught there, Thoreau seized one of his opportunities and replied, 'Yes, indeed, all of the branches and none of the roots.' At this Emerson laughed heartily."[13]

Cited by generations of Thoreau scholars, Albee's anecdote has contributed to the prevailing view that Thoreau chose mostly to "forget" his Harvard education. "The secretary of Thoreau's Harvard graduating class wrote to him in 1847," according to Walter Harding, "asking about his pursuits and achievements since graduation from the college ten years earlier."[14] At the time of his response, Thoreau had recently returned from his sojourn at Walden Pond, during which (as I argue in chapter three) Thoreau spent must of his time practicing the liberal arts — reading the ancient classics in the wide and eager manner advocated by Harvard new humanists. "I confess that I have very little class spirit, and have almost forgotten that I ever spent four years at Cambridge," Thoreau writes, nonetheless, in his letter to Harvard classmates. "That must have been in a former state of existence. It is difficult to realize that the old routine is still kept up.

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[12] Albee, *Remembrances of Emerson* (New York: Robert G. Cooke, 1901), 19.

[13] Albee, 22.

[14] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 219-20.

However, I will undertake at last to answer your questions as well as I can in spite of a poor memory and defect of information."[15]

Thoreau's letter is worth quoting at length. His response is not a rejection of Harvard College but in many ways a veiled tribute to the style of classical learning he imbibed there. Thoreau challenges, mocks, and implicitly derides the post-college pursuits of his Harvard classmates:

> 1st then, I was born, they say, on the 12th of July 1817, on what is called the Virginia Road, in the east part of Concord.
> 2nd I was fitted, or rather made unfit, for College, at Concord Academy & elsewhere, mainly by myself, with the countenance of Phineas Allen, Preceptor.
> 3rd I am not married.
> 4th I dont know whether mine is a profession, or a trade, or what not. It is not yet learned, and in every instance has been practiced before being studied. The mercantile part of it was begun *here* by myself alone.
> —It is not one but legion. I will give you some of the monster's heads. I am a Schoolmaster — a Private Tutor, a Surveyor — a Gardener, a Farmer — a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster. If you will act the part of Iolas, and apply a hot iron to any of these heads, I shall be greatly obliged to you.
> 5th My present employment is to answer such orders as may be expected from so general an advertisement as the above — that is, if I see fit, which is not always the case, for I have found out a way to live without what is commonly called employment or industry attractive or otherwise. Indeed my steadiest employment, if such it can be called, is to keep myself at the top of my condition, and ready for whatever may turn up in heaven or on earth. For the last two or three years I have lived in Concord woods alone, something more than a mile from any neighbor, in a house build entirely by myself.
> 6th I cannot think of a single general fact of any importance before or since graduating

Putting aside the classical references that animate Thoreau's letter, his response describes with considerable wit the wide-ranging nature of his life's work. As he writes in *Walden*,

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[15] *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau,* The Correspondence, Vol. 1: 1834-1848, ed., Robert N. Hudspeth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 307.

Thoreau's pursuit of truth was not really a "profession, or a trade" at all. It was a *way of life*, one that must be "practiced before" — or at the same time — as it is "studied." "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school," Thoreau writes in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, "but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust."[16] Thoreau's pursuit was the practice of higher learning, that is, wide and eager reading, a variety of "thoughtful intellectual wandering" that he believed had the power to resist more socially accepted forms of "employment" in the mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau's letter bristles with oppositional energy. He refused to specialize, or submit to common views of what it means to be industrious — a monetized producer and consumer in antebellum society's emergent capitalist culture. Thoreau implicitly defines himself as an intellectual self-made man. Harvard College lurks, nonetheless, in the background. As we will see, Thoreau learned to conceive higher learning in noneconomic terms from the Harvard new humanists. Walter Harding notes that "Thoreau was regularly invited to attend annual dinners of [his Harvard class] and contribute his photograph to class archives." Thoreau's letter to his classmates, in 1847, Harding writes, was "the only time he even bothered to respond." To Harding, Thoreau's response is evidence that Harvard College, "so far as" Thoreau "was concerned, was something to be forgotten."[17]

Thoreau never forgot what he learned at Harvard College. He recognized his debt to classical learning, so to speak, and he paid it back throughout his life and writing.

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[16] Henry David Thoreau, *A Week, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 344. Further citations to *Walden* will be made within the body of my dissertation, accompanied by the abbreviation *W* and page numbers corresponding to the Library of America edition of the text.

[17] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 220.

Thoreau went to Walden, after all, to "transact some private business with the fewest possible obstacles" (*W*, p.). A good deal of his private business was to read the ancient Greek and Latin classics, a habit of mind he made public when he published his account of living in the woods, during which period, Thoreau says, he worked "about six weeks in a year," so that he could keep the rest of his time "free and clear for study" (*W*, p.). To argue that Thoreau believed his undergraduate experience forgettable is to miss the irony of his negative statements about Harvard. Thoreau pursued with passion the wide-ranging, rich and varied approach to books advocated by his Harvard teachers and mentors, especially his undergraduate professor of Greek Cornelius Conway Felton. He learned to read books and authors with a kind of quasi-religious enthusiasm that ran contrary to "the mercantile part" of antebellum American life. Thoreau engaged "higher" learning as a form of antimaterialism that has the power to resist antebellum America's obsession with economic pursuits — its emphasis on the growth of money and markets over and above the value of each person. Thoreau conceived his own way of life, in these terms, not as a "profession" or "trade" but as a scholarly — creative and intellectual — vocation.

Thoreau captures his dynamic approach to reading perhaps most vividly in a journal entry written during the winter of 1841. "A truly good book attracts very little favor to itself," he muses.[18] "It is so true that it teaches me better than to read it — I must

[18] Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L Howarth, Robert Sattlemeyer, Thomas Blanding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 268. Further citations to the Princeton edition of Thoreau's journal will be made within the text accompanied by the abbreviation, *PJ*, and followed by the appropriate volume and page numbers.

soon lay it down and commence living on its hint" (*PJ1*, 268). Thoreau says "the inspiring volume hardly leaves me leisure to finish its latter pages. It is slipping out of my fingers while I read. It creates no atmosphere in which it may be perused, but one in which its teachings may be practiced — It confers on me such wealth that I lay it down with the least regret — What I began by reading I must finish by acting" (*PJ1*, 268).

Thoreau "cannot stay to hear a *good* sermon and applaud at the conclusion," in other words, because he "shall be half way to Thermopylae before that" (*PJ1*, 268). His approach to books and reading implies physical movement, tremendous energy, a striking level of commitment to intellectual work and the real-world practice of living — through action. Thoreau's theory of education and reading evolved, in this way, as a quasi-religious endeavor, a creative pursuit with far-reaching social and political implications. His theory of higher learning, indeed, Thoreau's relationship to Harvard College, as mentioned earlier, always had a double-edge. Throughout his life it cut at least two ways. Heroic reading contained elements of valorization and critique that play off one another, for Thoreau, in a manner not unlike Thoreau's fascination with the antebellum market economy and his simultaneous concern over its limitations. Thoreau's theory and practice of higher learning appears, if not as sharp as John Brown's sword, the tool used by Brown's men to slash the bodies of five proslavery men in Pottawatomie, Kansas, then as effective, perhaps, as Captain Brown's own words, which reached a national audience through the free press during the weeks following Harpers Ferry.[19] Throughout his life Thoreau learned to wield words as weapons, and his "universal liturgy," his reading of poetry and the classics at John Brown's memorial service in Concord, cuts with a more

[19] For a detailed account of Brown's activity in Kansas, including his involvement in the execution style murder of five men, see Reynolds, 138-205.

deeply political edge than many of Thoreau's previous statements about the problem of American slavery. In 1859, Thoreau turned the Harvard classicists' own civic-minded approach to books and reading against them. He did so with increased rhetorical force, even a kind of linguistic violence.

Our story is one of gradual progression, as Thoreau's political philosophy of "word-as-deed activism" developed alongside his philosophy of education.[20] Thoreau started out with a conception of books and learning as a form of antimaterialism, and he ends up with a stronger sense of education as a vehicle for civil disobedience, a pursuit he saw, in the end, not as private and passive but public and active. This is Thoreau's greatest contribution to the history and theory of higher education in the United States, and it links his thought and writing to twenty-first century conceptions of the "public humanities."[21] My first chapter sets this story in motion by pairing two figures, Emerson and Cornelius Conway Felton, Thoreau's undergraduate Harvard professor.

Chapter one views Felton as a conduit of Harvard new humanism, one who personified the variety of higher learning that the transcendentalists adapted, extended, and put to use for their own more social and political purposes. Felton's teaching remains largely untheorized by historians of transcendentalism. He grew up in poverty, the son of a harness-maker, and displayed a passion for books from an early age. Felton took special interest in classical languages at Simeon Putnam's Franklin Academy in North Andover, Massachusetts. He entered Harvard College in 1823, where Felton

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[20] For a perceptive reading of Thoreau's "word-as-deed activism," see Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 60-74. Gilmore does not connect Thoreau's political philosophy with his theory and practice of education.

[21] See, for example, Julie Ellison, "The New Public Humanists," *The Publication of the Modern Language Association*, Vol. 128.2 (March 2013): 289-298.

studied with the two leading prophets of European-style new humanism in the United States, Edward Everett and George Bancroft (1800-1891). Everett and Bancroft shaped Felton's approach to classical learning. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1827, and a master's in 1830, Felton became Tutor in Latin at Harvard. He rose quickly through the academic ranks. In 1834 Felton was promoted to the Eliot Professorship in Greek Literature at Harvard, a distinguished appointment he held for almost thirty years. He became President of Harvard in 1860. Felton's magnum opus, a collection of forty-nine public lectures titled *Greece, Ancient and Modern*, appeared posthumously in 1867. The editors of this two-volume work praise it as "essential service to that cause of liberal culture to which the author's whole life was consecrated."[22]

Along the lines of his mentor Edward Everett, Felton viewed reading as a form of imaginative travel. Felton taught his students to "enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics."[23] "It elevates the spirit," Edward Everett explained in his widely read essay, "On the History of Grecian Art," "to think that you are perusing the words of the great masters of wisdom, poetry, and learning, from ages so long elapsed."[24] Felton's first major work, an 1833 edition of Homer's *Iliad*, built upon the scholarship of German philologist F. A. Wolf (1759-1824). In his American *Iliad*,

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[22] Cornelius Conway Felton, *Greece, Ancient and Modern, Lectures Delivered Before the Lowell Institute* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), iii.

[23] See Felton's lecture "On Classical Learning" in *The Introductory Discourse and Lectures Delivered in Boston, Before the Convention of Teachers, and Other Friends of Education, Assembled to Form the American Institute of Instruction, August 1830* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1831), 330. Hereafter I will cite Felton's lecture "On Classical Learning" within the body of my dissertation, accompanied by the abbreviation *OCL* and page numbers corresponding to the 1831 Boston edition of the text.

[24] Qtd. in Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 53.

Felton announces, his goal is

> to lead the young student to read . . . [Homer's] poem, not in the spirit of a school-boy conning a dull lesson to be 'construed' and 'parsed' and forgotten when the hour of recitation is at an end, but in the delightful consciousness that he is employing his mind upon one of the noblest monuments of the genius of man. Whatever his conclusions may be as to the merit of particular passages, if any remarks of mine should chance to excite his attention to the real character of the poem, and to promote a habit of analytical criticism, whether his opinions agree with my own or not, the object which I have proposed to myself will be accomplished.[25]

Felton advocates "a habit of analytical criticism," or heightened historical consciousness, which involves projecting oneself *into* the past. "We must study ourselves into the Homeric age," he explains in a subsequent edition of his American *Iliad*.[26] Thoreau took a copy of Felton's Homer along with him to read by the shores of Walden Pond. The idea of "entering into" the past deeply influenced Emerson as well.

Chapter one argues that Emerson's theory of creative reading has much in common with the approach to books advocated by Cornelius Felton and the Harvard classicists. Emerson was a firm believer in the new humanist concept of sympathetic reading. His early education lectures build on the classical college idea that a true American scholar — a creative, sympathetic reader — must enter fully into the spirit of past thinkers and writers. Emerson portrays higher learning as an essentially imaginative endeavor, a creative pursuit that cannot be counted, cut up, commodified, and construed solely in terms of markets and money. His theory of creative reading emerges as an

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[25] Felton, "Preface," in *The Iliad of Homer, from the Text of Wolf, With English Notes*, ed., Cornelius Felton (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company; Cambridge: Brown, Shattuck, and Co., 1833), iv.

[26] See Felton's "Preface" *in The Iliad of Homer, from the Text of Wolf, With English Notes*, new and revised edition, ed. Cornelius Felton (Boston: James Monroe and Company, 1846), xi.

approach to human development, a variety of individual empowerment that challenges the narrow materialist assumptions of his time. Thoreau's own philosophy of education cannot be understood outside the context of Emerson's Harvard classicism.

Thoreau's theory of reading, in short, was a variety of romantic new humanism, filtered through Emerson and Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton. The connection between these thinkers — Emerson, Thoreau, and Felton — opens a window into a broader cultural and intellectual dynamic, namely, the close relationship between Harvard new humanism and the transcendentalists' theory of "higher" education. In this light my second and third chapters serve as a pair. Chapter two explores the development of Thoreau's theory of books and reading as a vehicle for self-culture and social reform in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Instead of forcing "a straight-cut ditch [out] of a free, meandering brook," Thoreau believed education should take the form of "thoughtful intellectual wandering."[27] He too valued a style of "broad-gauged, widely diffused learning," a habit of mind that remained grounded in world literature and the study of Greek and Latin classics.[28] Much like the teaching of Cornelius Felton, and the early education lectures of Emerson, Thoreau's first book portrays reading as a form of imaginative travel — an intellectual adventure that has the power to break free from the

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[27] "What does education often do! — It makes a straight-cut ditch out of a free, meandering brook," Thoreau writes in his journal during the fall of 1850 (*PJ3*, 107). Quoted in Martin Bickman, "Thoreau and the Tradition of the Active Mind," introduction to *Uncommon Learning: Henry David Thoreau on Education*, ed. Martin Bickman, with a foreword by Jonathan Kozol (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), vii. Also quoted in Martin Bickman, *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 65. See also Louis B. Solomon, "The Straight-Cut Ditch: Thoreau on Education," *American Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1962): 19-36. For the phrase "thoughtful intellectual wandering," see Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19.

[28] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19.

narrow assumptions of his time. In *A Week*, Thoreau portrays the experience of reading ancient classics as form of thoughtful intellectual wandering, a mode of being — "a high and by way serene to travel" — that has the power to resist the rule of antebellum industry and commerce.[29]

Walden extends this message. My third chapter interprets Thoreau's meditation on "Reading" as a romantic and new humanist manifesto, a plea for the personal and public value of broad-gauged, widely diffused learning. Much his vision in *A Week*, Thoreau's idea of liberal education in the third chapter of *Walden* is grounded in the study of ancient Greek and Latin classics. Thoreau went to Walden, by this way of looking, to extend his undergraduate course of classical studies. Cornelius Felton served, so to speak, as Thoreau's graduate advisor *in absentia*. Thoreau's life at Walden Pond can be interpreted as his "time away" at graduate school. Taken together, the only two book-length works Thoreau published in his lifetime, *A Week* and *Walden*, can be viewed as an extended educational argument, that is, a product — an exhibition — of Cornelius Felton's own new humanist theory of heroic reading. *A Week* and *Walden* serve as literary and intellectual training ground, textual performances in which Thoreau works out the mature theory of reading that he wields so skillfully in his handling of the John Brown affair.

In Thoreau's portrait education emerges not as a strong arm of social control but a

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[29] "Reading the classics, or conversing with those old Greeks and Latins in their surviving works, is like walking amid the stars and constellations, a high and by way serene to travel," Thoreau writes in the "Tuesday" chapter of *A Week* [Henry David Thoreau, *A Week, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 183]. Further citations to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* will be made within the text accompanied with the short-title *A Week* and page numbers corresponding to the Library of America edition.

way to challenge the assumptions of even the most dominant cultural voice. By the time he stood up to read ancient classics at John Brown's memorial service on December 2, 1859, his approach to books and reading had developed a sharp social and political edge. Thoreau's theory of reading as a variety of antimaterialism flowered into a form of public political resistance toward the end of his life. Thoreau's revision of Harvard new humanism was more radical than Emerson's. Chapter four interprets Thoreau's "universal liturgy" as a powerful challenge to cultural and intellectual authority, in which Thoreau wields the words of Harvard classicists against them. Thoreau's reading of poetry and the classics at Concord Town Hall was the culmination of his lifetime of classical studies. His "universal liturgy" deploys higher learning as a tool for political activism. In this process, Thoreau presents Captain John Brown — not the Harvard classicists — as a model new humanist American scholar.

Thoreau interprets Harpers Ferry through the lens of Harvard new humanism as a way to challenge "so called liberally educated men."[30] He wanted to spur antebellum cultural and intellectual elites into action. He also revised the work of Emerson, his transcendentalist mentor, in the winter of 1859. The Latin translation Thoreau read aloud on the afternoon of December 2, just hours after the execution of John Brown, was almost certainly Emerson's.[31] Thoreau corrected Emerson's translation in the days

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[30] "Even college-bred and so called liberally educated men here [in Concord] and elsewhere have really little or no acquaintance with the English classics; and as for the recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and Bibles, which are accessible to all who will know of them, there are the feeblest efforts anywhere made to become acquainted with them," Thoreau writes in the "Reading" chapter of *Walden* (407).

[31] Wendell Glick discovered what he convincingly argues is the manuscript of Emerson's translation, housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library. Thoreau's revision of Emerson's

following John Brown's memorial service in Concord. My concluding claim is that Thoreau asserts his own literary and intellectual authority with the publication of his corrected Tacitus translation in 1860. In this moment, Thoreau arguably emerges as a more effective public intellectual. Thoreau's revision of Emerson's translation is more provocative and confrontational — a more activist political statement. Thoreau's transcendental Tacitus, in the end, was a more effective form of literary and civil disobedience.

This point speaks to some of the broader implications of my project. Scholars like Wesley T. Mott have argued that American transcendentalism, and Thoreau's contribution in particular, can be "defined as an *educational* demonstration."[32] I agree with this assertion, but I would like to add, first, that the transcendentalist movement, and Thoreau's contribution in particular, can be viewed as "an educational demonstration" that was grounded in the romantic roots of the antebellum classical college. Thoreau's

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translation also exists there, in Thoreau's own distinct hand. See Wendell Glick, "Thoreau Rejects an Emerson Text," *Studies in Bibliography* 25 (1972): 213-216.

[32] See Wesley T. Mott, "Education" in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 153-171. "So fundamental to the Transcendentalists were teaching and learning — as profession, calling, trope — that the 'movement' might just as fairly be defined as an educational demonstration," Mott writes (153). "Thoreau's literary masterpiece, *Walden*, moreover, is in large part an argument about how to read and learn" (161). Mott's wonderfully informative essay does not, however, consider the classical college roots of the transcendentalists' philosophy of education. In the Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism (3-8), also see K. P. Van Anglen's essay on "Greek and Roman Classics," which considers the transcendentalist's classicism but — as is typical of the scholarship I have encountered — not from the angle of the social and political force of the Concord writers' reworking of their own classical education. Anglen refers to transcendental classicism as "intellectually progressive," which it certainly was, but it also had a strong political emphasis.

theory of books and reading, and the transcendentalist movement as a whole, at the same time looks forward to some of our own most ambitious plans for revitalizing liberal arts in the twenty-first century. This is a second major implication for my work.

I have already indicated that Thoreau's dynamic approach to books anticipates twenty-first century conceptions of the "public humanities."[33] The scholar Timothy K. Eastman defines public scholarship as "scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequence."[34] Thoreau's reading of poetry and the classics at John Brown's memorial service in Concord can be interpreted in these same terms. Thoreau was not the only Concord writer, furthermore, who viewed creative reading, writing, and speaking as a form of public political engagement. Other transcendentalists practiced the liberal arts as a way of life, a habit of mind devoted to "the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*."[35] As a group, the transcendentalists viewed education as a way of speaking

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[33] See Ellison, "The New Public Humanists."

[34] Eastman, "Engaged Scholarship and Faculty Rewards: A National Conversation," *Diversity and Democracy* 12.1 (Winter 2009), 18. Qtd. in Ellison, 289.

[35] "A Brief Overview of Progressive Education," The John Dewey Project on Education, accessed January 11, 2013, http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/articles/proged.html. "During most of the twentieth century," according to the Dewey Project, "the term 'progressive education' has been used to describe ideas and practices that aim to make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society. Although there are numerous differences of style and emphasis among progressive educators, they share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives. The education of engaged citizens, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: (1). *Respect for diversity*, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2). the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. These elements of progressive education have been termed 'child-centered' and 'social reconstructionist'

and acting out, a way to actively confront the most pressing issues of their time. The American Association of American Colleges & Universities defines itself as "a voice and a force for liberal education in the 21st century." According to the AAC&U,

> Liberal education is an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g. science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.[36]

Such a focus on "learning that empowers individuals" is further articulated in a 2003 report published by the AAC&U, titled "Practicing Liberal Education: Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Learning." "Practicing Liberal Education" argues for the personal and public value of an approach to higher learning that cultivates "social responsibility" and the application of "knowledge and skills in real-world settings."[37]

"Practicing Liberal Education" is part of a large collective enterprise, and in this sense does not align with the anti-institutional energy of transcendental higher learning. But the themes of individual empowerment and social responsibility nonetheless resonate with the new humanist educational vision of Thoreau and the Concord writers.

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approaches, and while in extreme forms they have sometimes been separated, in the thought of John Dewey and other major theorists they are seen as being necessarily related to each other."

[36] "What is a 21st Century Liberal Education?," *Association of American Colleges & Universities: Celebrating 100 Years of Leadership for Liberal Education* (website), American Association of Colleges and & Universities (AAC&U), accessed March 31, 2015, https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education.

[37] Carol Geary Schneider, "Practicing Liberal Education: Formative Themes in the Re-invention of Liberal Learning," Liberal Education 9, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 1-8, accessed January 11, 2013, https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/practicing-liberal-education-formative-themes-re-invention-liberal.

"Historically," writes the AAC&U, the practice of liberal education has changed radically over the centuries." We are currently "in the midst of far-reaching — if largely unreported — change today." The theme of change is a distinguishing characteristic that runs throughout the history of liberal arts learning in the United States. Yet several key principles have remained the same. "Though liberal education has assumed many forms across different times and places," according to the AAC&U, "it has always been concerned with important educational aims: cultivating intellectual and ethical judgment, helping students comprehend and negotiate their relationship to the larger world, and preparing graduates for lives of civic responsibility and leadership." These aims have been actively reshaped over the years — retrofitted to meet the challenge of new historical situations and cultural contexts. Despite its adaptability, however, many Americans harbor "a striking ambivalence towards the traditions of 'liberal' or 'liberal arts' education," the AAC&U writes. Reaching all the way back to the nation's founding, liberal education has been "at one and the same time prized, despised, revised, and disguised."[38]

The AAC&U tells a story of persistent relevance, despite historical disagreement about the practicality of liberal education. On one hand, the liberal arts have been prized "as virtually synonymous with the expansion of opportunity." "There is a persistent identification of liberal education with democratic freedom, scientific progress, and excellence that goes back to the revolutionary period when many civic and political leaders extolled the liberal arts and challenged them to embrace the scientific and practical needs of the new republic." On the other hand, liberal education has been

[38] Schneider, 3, 2.

"despised," viewed not as synonymous with opportunity but as a sign of exclusion, elitism, and white cultural privilege.[39] "Many analysts and policy leaders declare without apology that liberal education is already being consigned to the dustbins of history," the AAC&U reports. "Markets are keyed to short-term outcomes and have no patience for forms of learning that pay off over a lifetime," in the view of many detractors. "Practical studies will sell," while "the rest will just wither away."[40]

The transcendentalists were nineteenth-century advocates of liberal education and the public humanities. They were defenders of liberal learning and its ability to adapt — its ability to reshape itself and confront some of the most pressing problems in modern American society. In this sense the Concord writers, like the Harvard classicists, saw liberal education as "eminently practical" (*OCL*, 316). They defined the "usefulness" of higher learning in new humanist — not narrow and economic but antimaterialist and socially conscious terms. The human value of higher learning, in Thoreau's account, is immeasurable. A central claim of the AAC&U is that the historic debate over liberal education and its value — or lack of it — continues to shape our discussions in the world of higher education today. The question of how — and why — to practice the liberal arts has always been present in American society. It will probably never go away. American classicists like Cornelius Felton grappled with problems related to the "practicality" or "usefulness" of liberal education, along with the "real-world" significance of reading the ancient classics. Thoreau and the transcendentalists inherited the same basic problem in

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[39] Schneider, 2. Geoffrey Galt Harpham grapples with the racist legacy of liberal arts and humanities education in *The Humanities and the Dream of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[40] Schneider, 2.

the early nineteenth century.

As education theorists, Thoreau and the transcendentalists grappled with questions of value and practice. In this sense Thoreau's major work can be viewed not just as an argument about how best to read and learn, but as part of a larger cultural debate about the value of liberal arts education. Thoreau's philosophy of education is part of a larger cultural conversation about the theory and practice of higher learning in the United States. "As we survey developments across the spectrum of higher education reform," writes the AAC&U, "three major themes emerge as keys to the newly engaged and practical liberal education for the twenty-first century. These themes are intellectual judgment, social responsibility, and integrative learning."[41] My suggestion is that these three themes, intellectual judgment, social responsibility, and integrative learning can help us better understand the implications of transcendentalism *as* a liberal education movement. The Concord writers' engagement with all three themes, moreover, can help us better understand the challenges that liberal learning continues to face in our own time.

The full story of transcendentalism as an education movement has not yet been told.[42] But Thoreau, Emerson, and the Concord writers were in many ways nineteenth-century Harvard classicists. They were all touched by the revitalization of liberal education that took Harvard and greater Boston by storm beginning in the 1820s and 30s. The Concord writers reworked new humanist ideas about education and learning, from

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[41] Schneider, 3.

[42] As mentioned earlier, Wesley T. Mott's wonderfully informative essay on "Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, discusses the romantic and Unitarian origins of transcendentalist approaches to education. But Mott scarcely mentions the liberal arts and classical college context of the transcendentalists' approach to "higher" learning. I am yet to find a source that discusses the new humanist roots of transcendentalist education theory in anything like a full or satisfactory way.

the early days of transcendentalist ferment up to the end of the nineteenth century.[43] Everywhere we look, in fact, the Concord writers' philosophy of education is grounded in the study of ancient Greek and Latin classics. Thoreau was one of the transcendentalist movement's most perceptive educational thinkers, but other Concord writers viewed education as a form of individual empowerment. We can view transcendentalism, in fact, as an education movement that was broadly committed to what the AAC&U calls "the liberal arts of practice." Emerson, Thoreau, and the Concord writers approached books and higher learning with revolutionary enthusiasm, namely, with a sense of curiosity and imagination that still has "the potential to make college learning more engaged, better connected with communities beyond the campus, more 'hands on,' and, in the long run, more educationally powerful."[44]

The AAC&U maintains a strong line of institutional — and at times instrumentalist — rhetoric. Liberal education may not be "keyed to short-term outcomes," the organization writes, but it does "*pay off* over a lifetime."[45] Several recent

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[43] A long history of transcendentalism as an education movement would begin with the romantic roots of the antebellum classical college and extend to the establishment of The Concord School of Philosophy in the 1880s. This school is considered an early and innovative model for adult education in the United States. Activities at The Concord School of Philosophy also had strong new humanist overtones. (Alcott modeled the school, for example, on Plato's Academy.) There is currently no book-length history of the school, at least to my knowledge. For an account of Alcott's involvement with The Concord School of Philosophy, see John Matteson, *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 391-93, 407-8 and passim. Also see Bruce Ronda, "The Concord School of Philosophy and the Legacy of Transcendentalism," *The New England Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (December 2009), 575-607.

[44] Schneider, 4.

[45] Schneider, 4. Emphasis added.

books make a more explicitly anti-economic and civic-minded argument. In *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Martha Nussbaum challenges the notion that higher learning can best be understood in terms of technical job training and the growth of national economies. Nussbaum sees higher learning as a form of "human development," a creative pursuit that must be protected on its own terms. "From early on," Nussbaum writes, "leading U.S. educators connected the liberal arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens. The liberal arts model is still relatively strong, but it is under severe stress now in this time of economic hardship."[46]

In *Not For Profit* Nussbaum highlights "another aspect of the U.S. educational tradition that stubbornly refuses assimilation into the [economic] growth-directed model." The tradition of "active learning," which implies "participation of the child in inquiry and questioning," according to Nussbaum, refuses to conceive education solely in terms of markets and money. Active learning is part of "a long Western philosophical tradition of education theory, ranging from Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century to John Dewey in the twentieth." The tradition of active learning "includes such eminent educators as Friedrich Froebel in Germany, Johann Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Bronson Alcott in the United States, and Maria Montessori in Italy." The Concord writers approach to education comes out of the same philosophical context. Nussbaum does not mention Emerson and Thoreau, but she does discuss Alcott's innovations at the Temple School, and Pestalozzi — though Nussbaum does not make the connection — deeply influenced the thinking of both Emerson and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. Active learning

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[46] Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 16, 17-18.

"argues that education is not just about passive assimilation of facts and cultural traditions," Nussbaum summarizes, "but about challenging the mind to become active, competent, and thoughtfully critical in a complex world." If this perspective sounds like the AAC&U's vision, it is because Nussbaum is an active member of the organization. Active learning in the United States "supplanted an older" model "in which children sat still at desks all day and simply absorbed, and then regurgitated, the material that was brought their way." The newer "usually includes a large commitment to critical thinking and argument that traces its roots back to Socrates." The influence of active learning "has not yet ceased, despite increasing pressures on schools to produce the sort of student who can do well on a standardized test."[47]

Nussbaum's account of liberal education runs contrary to models "focused entirely on education for national economic gain."[48] Two other recent books agree. In *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be,* Andrew Delbanco argues that higher education is a distinctly American innovation. "At the heart of the American college and its history," Delbanco claims, is "a concept of what might be called lateral learning — the proposition that students have something important to learn from one another." Delbanco's theory, like Nussbaum's, focuses not on quantifiable skills and concepts viewed as marketable commodities, but rather on the cultivation of "certain qualities of mind and heart requisite for reflective citizenship." Delbanco cites several qualities in a list of "no particular order of priority, since they are inseparable from one another":

1. A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.
2. The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate

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[47] Nussbaum, 18.

[48] Nussbaum, 3.

phenomena.
3. Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.
4. A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own.
5. A sense of ethical responsibility.[49]

Transcendental higher learning had everything to do with cultivating "a skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past." Thoreau, Emerson, and the Concord writers viewed creative reading as a certain "willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own." In this sense, transcendental higher learning cultivates "a sense of ethical responsibility." The transcendentalists emphasized anything if not "the ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena." In many ways this is what the transcendentalist worldview is all about. Transcendental higher learning, viewed as a variety of thoughtful intellectual wandering, is displayed most vividly in books like *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

According to Emerson and Thoreau, creative reading allows us to lead more deeply meaningful lives, challenging us to think beyond the boundaries of our own narrow world. This is what Thoreau meant when he said he had traveled much in Concord. "Liberal education will always arouse criticism in a land driven by economic ambition and anxiety, even more so today when hope for the future has come to seem so tenuous," writes Michael S. Roth, in his 2014 book *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. "If higher education is conceived only as a job-placement program for positions with which we are already familiar, then liberal learning does not make much sense. But if higher education is to be an intellectual and experiential adventure

[49] Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 54, 3.

and not a bureaucratic assignment of skill capacity, if it is to prize free inquiry rather than training for 'the specific vocations to which [students] are destined,' then we must resist the call to limit access to it or to diminish its scope." Roth's focus on the "intellectual and experiential adventure" of higher learning could double as a strong description of Thoreau's interest in travel narrative, a genre that becomes, in Thoreau's hands, a way to think and write about the pleasure — and challenge of living a rich and varied life of the mind. "Liberal education teaches us to open ourselves to the world's 'various genius' and ignite our own and perhaps someone else's imagination," Roth muses, quoting Emerson's famous line in "The American Scholar." "Jane Addams emphasizes the challenges and the opportunities for using one's education to deepen one's empathy, to expand the sympathetic imagination. At its best, education develops the capacities for seeing possibilities and for relishing the world across borders we might not have dared to cross. Education must lead us beyond these borders if it is to be more than training for a role that has already been allocated by the powers that be. By expanding our horizons, liberal learning gives us a context for hope, and it requires some confidence in the future."[50]

Thoreau's theory and practice of reading, and the transcendentalists' view of higher learning, can best be understood in this same context of twenty-first century thinking about education. Michael S. Roth makes his argument in favor of liberal education beyond the university in 2014. The transcendentalists, alongside Harvard classicists like Cornelius Conway Felton, were making similar arguments for the transformative power of higher learning in the early nineteenth century.

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[50] Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 8.

This brings me to another implication for my project. Female transcendentalists also practiced the liberal arts. Women like Sarah Ripley and Mary Moody Emerson put their own wide and eager reading to work in ways that often surpassed their more privileged male counterparts.[51] Emerson's aunts were "broad-gauged" and "widely diffused" American scholars. They were thoughtful intellectual wanderers.[52] Emerson embraced his aunts as models for transcendental higher learning. Both these women, and others like them, learned to wield intellectual authority through their study of ancient Greek and Latin classics.

Emerson consistently genders the American scholar male in his published work, but he recognized female transcendentalists as among the most widely learned and deeply knowledgeable American thinkers and writers of his time. Sarah Ripley "became one of the best Greek scholars in the country," in Emerson's view, as we will see in chapter one. "But her studies took a wide range."[53] Other female transcendentalists were also broadly learned scholars of Greek and Latin. Margaret Fuller was perhaps the most well known female classicist of her generation.[54] The first of Fuller's proto-feminist conversations

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[51] See Joan W. Goodwin, *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley: The Life of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998) and Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of American Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[52] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19.

[53] See Emerson's obituary for Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley in Goodwin, 2.

[54] For a compelling account of Fuller's classical education, see Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self*: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 212-34. See also Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American*

for women, held at Elizabeth Peabody's West Street bookshop in Boston, engaged the theme of ancient Greek mythology. Fuller pursued an active and public intellectual life: especially in her later years, she gained a national audience, as a social and cultural critic whose politics challenged and extended the ideas of Emerson.[55] Much of Fuller's writing, like Thoreau's, is full of reference to classical books and ancient authors.[56] Fuller stood as a commanding presence among the male Concord writers, and Elizabeth Peabody was a key intellectual player as well. Peabody taught Latin language and literature at her West Street bookshop, and preceded Fuller as teacher and assistant at Bronson Alcott's Temple School in Boston.[57]

Everywhere we look in the nineteenth century, female transcendentalists — not just their male counterparts — were reading ancient Greek and Latin classics. Peabody's theory of wide and eager reading allowed her to assert a kind of "intellectual and priestly

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Romanic Life, Volume 1: The Private Years (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24-120.

[55] The best account of Fuller's life as a social and cultural critic remains Charles Capper, *Margaret Fuller: An American Romantic Life, Volume 2: The Public Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also John Matteson, *The Lives of Margaret Fuller* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012) and Megan Marshall, *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

[56] See, for example, Fuller's proto-feminist work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), which makes elaborate use of Greek and Roman mythology. The best modern edition is Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

[57] For Peabody's life as a student and teacher of ancient classics, see Bruce A. Ronda, *Elizabeth Peabody: A Reformer on Her Own Terms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

power," as Phyllis Cole and Jane Argersinger have argued.[58] In a striking passage from an essay called "A Vision," Peabody depicts "both a rise to authority and an initiating scene of reading."[59] Peabody's account bears striking resemblance to Thoreau's theory and practice of creative reading. "A few evenings since, while sitting in deep reflection over a pamphlet that contains a new definition of life, and seeming to catch a gleam of light upon that mysterious death-in-life which so extensively characterizes modern genius," Peabody writes, "suddenly I found myself taken off my feet, and realized before my eyes at once all Time."[60] Peabody describes "a rise to authority" that is at its core a romantic and new humanist "scene of reading." Her reflection captures the tremendous energy and excitement, the depth of "perspective" and "sweep of vision," that characterizes similar scenes of reading in Thoreau's work, beginning with *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Male and female transcendentalists, from Emerson and Thoreau to Fuller, Peabody, Sarah Ripley, Mary Moody Emerson, and others, describe the process of "entering into" the spirit of books and authors as a kind of "mysterious death-in-life," an activity which generates transformations.[61] In such a moment of heroic

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[58] Phyllis Cole and Jane Argersinger, "Exaltadas: A Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 57, no. 1-2 (2011), 6.

[59] Cole and Argersinger, 6.

[60] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, "A Vision," *Pioneer* 1 (March 1843): 13. Quoted in Cole and Argensinger, vi-viii.

[61] In his essay on "Performance" [in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990)], Henry Sayre defines performance as "an activity which generates transformations, as the reintegration of art with what is 'outside' it, an 'opening up' of the 'field'" (103). Sayre is concerned primarily with modern and contemporary performance art, but reading itself, in the transcendentalists' account, seems like a variety of performance — at least in Sayre's definition of the term. Sayre describes performance as

reading, the identity of a true American scholar merges with the historical text, in an act of creative imagination. This approach mirrors the model of creative reading taught by Cornelius Felton and his colleagues.[62] Peabody is swept off her feet, she says, and her eyes realize all time. In the act of reading she sees

> not only the real personages of history, but the fictitious beings of poetry and romance — equally palpable — were present, and all the creations of the masters of art. The pictures of which Pausanius gives an account, and which I supposed lost long ago, were before me, not only in all their original coloring, but even alive as they were not on the canvas. The lost statuary reappeared; and temples, whose decayed remnants alone have been seen since the period of recorded history, were fresh to my sense as the Gothic churches of the middle ages, and the mixed architecture of the present.
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> What was more remarkable still, the air seemed pervaded with music: — nay, music seemed the substance of the atmosphere. Now the Doric, now the Lydian, and even the lost Olympian measure, obeyed, as it were, my thought; and I heard Arion's and Orpheus's songs, no less plainly than the later music of modern times.
>
> Vainly should I attempt to describe the ancient music. Its effect was not — like the modern — to plunge the soul into dreams and prophecies and vain longings. It acted on my senses, and whirled me into an intoxication of delight. I understood at once all the wild forms on the Etruscan terra cotta; the stories of the Bacchanalian fervor; the martial deeds of high antiquity; the taming of monsters; the conquest of infernal regions; the rising of the walls of Thebes, and the following of Orpheus by the rocks and trees. The fables of antiquity seemed to me no longer fables, but inevitable facts. I did not pretend to ask about probabilities; I did not question my perceptions; I saw, and believed my senses. Not more easily does the eye integrate with the distant horizon the various objects of the landscape, and even, in proportion to the sweep of vision, give the mind a

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a dialogue between artist, or artwork, and audience: Peabody and Thoreau describe reading as just such a theatrical conversation, in which the artwork — or author — and reader become one. Sayre describes transformation as a "common 'coming together' of artist and audience in the activity of performance" (102).

[62] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 44-98 and *The Classics and Culture*, 47-130. See Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*. For a useful summary of "sympathetic criticism," and the development of the idea that readers can merge with the "spirit" of the books and authors they study, see M.D. Walhout, "The Hermeneutical Turn in American Critical Theory, 1830-1860," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57, no. 4 (October 1996): 683-703.

> sense of deeper repose, than, with the same calming effect, appeared in the world of time 'one day as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.' In this music life, Forms unfolded to me their meanings, — I mean more especially those forms which own their existence to the plastic genius of men. I saw Architecture was solid harmony, and Painting liquid harmony; every statue a single chord, every picture a melody.[63]

In this astonishing passage, Peabody meets the creative energy of history — "the plastic genius of men" — with imaginative power of her own. The moment is transformative. It empowers her. Peabody makes it more than half-way to Thermopylae. Indeed, female transcendentalists were among the most creative readers who lived and wrote during Thoreau's time. Peabody's description is full of movement and vitality. It is feverish, fully aroused, undeniably active: the passage explodes with sensory overload, and it includes a broad range of reference to the fine arts, from statuary and architecture to music, painting, and pottery. Peabody's "Vision" merges a global range of cultural materials, across broad space and deep time, as if the culture of all human creativity becomes one "liquid harmony," part of the same "single chord," and "every picture" becomes "a melody," to which Peabody — as sympathetic reader — has infinite access.[64]

Peabody's "Vision" is ecstatic. Her experience of reading is "an intoxication of delight." Thoreau describes his engagement with books, especially the ancient classics, in the same language of quasi-religious enthusiasm. To Thoreau, Peabody, and just about all the American transcendentalists, "The fables of antiquity," become "no longer fables, but inevitable facts." Ancient authors become virtually present — and endlessly

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[63] Peabody, "A Vision," 13.

[64] For the term and concept of "deep time" see Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2008) and Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007).

applicable — to the life and thought of Concord writers. Peabody published her "Vision" in the spring of 1843. She was an active influence among the male transcendentalists up until her death in 1894. To what extent were female transcendentalists like Peabody, Fuller, Sarah Ripley and Mary Moody Emerson all positive models for the higher learning of Emerson and Thoreau? To what extent did female transcendentalists rival the educational influence of Harvard classicists like Cornelius Conway Felton? And in what sense were female transcendentalists, perhaps more courageously than Emerson and Thoreau, challenging antebellum cultural and intellectual authorities through the vehicle of their own wide and eager reading — by way of their own classical teaching and learning?[65]

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[65] In *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), Caroline Winterer shows how American women have "found in classicism's many literary and material forms a way to imagine and articulate new roles for themselves" (2-3). Winterer focuses on educated women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but does not directly mention the female transcendentalists. Her account of women and the classics can be compared to what John Levi Barnard has called "outsider classicism" ["Ancient History, American Time: Chesnutt's Outsider Classicism and the Present Past," *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (January 2014): 71-86]. Winterer writes about elite women like Abigail Adams, who used their reading of ancient classics as a way to step out of traditional female roles and enter into political discussion with their husbands. These women were cultural "insiders," to be sure, but their status as women made them "outsider classicists," as well, in the sense that they could not attend institutions like Harvard. Winterer also discusses the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, who made use of classical learning as a way to assert her voice as a female and African- American poet. This example is closer to the sense in which John Levi Barnard defines the term "outsider classicism." Barnard argues that the African-American writer Charles Chesnutt made "use of the classical tradition as a mode of resistance to the dominant narrative of American history" (74). This concept is quite similar to the way Thoreau and the female transcendentalists engaged the ancient Greek and Latin classics: as a mode of resistance to dominant culture. In some ways Thoreau was both an "outsider" and "insider" classicist, as it were. As a white male, from a modest middle-class household, Thoreau gained admittance to Harvard and earned a formal classical education. But as I argue throughout my dissertation, Thoreau often used his "insider" classicism to question the assumptions of reigning antebellum cultural and intellectual authorities. This is especially the case in Thoreau's public handling of the John Brown

This line of inquiry is not as well developed in my dissertation as it could be. A future version of my project will consider the gender dynamics of transcendentalism as an education movement. For now, suffice it to say that Thoreau depicts "a rise to authority" in "scenes of reading" that pepper the pages of his own major work.[66] Thoreauvian scenes of reading have much in common with the way female transcendentalists seize power and authority though their lifelong engagement with ancient Greek and Latin classics.

The title of my introduction, *Half-Way to Thermopylae*, captures the classical roots of Thoreau's theory and practice of reading. Thoreau's reference to the ancient battle of Thermopylae has long-range significance: it captures the essence, the oppositional energy, of his mature theory of education and reading. The battle of Thermopylae was the first confrontation between the Persians and the Greeks during the

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affair. His theory and practice of reading was a kind of "insider-outsider" classicism. See also John Levi Barnard, "Ruins Amidst Ruins: Black Classicism and the Empire of Slavery," *American Literature* 86, no. 2 (June 2014): 361-389. For other works that theorize the concept of "black classicism," see William W. Cook and James Tatum, *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Emily Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and "Re-rooting the Classical Tradition: New Directions in Black Classicism," *Classical Receptions Journal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 87-103; Patrice Rankine, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Michele Valerie Ronnick, introduction to *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*, ed. Ronnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 1-22 and "William Sanders Scarborough and the Politics of Classical Education for African Americans," in *Classical Antiquity and the Politics of America: From George Washington to George W. Bush*, ed. Michael Meckler (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 55-67.

[66] Cole and Argersinger, 6.

Persian invasion of mainland Greece in 480-479 B.C. The Greek force at Thermopylae was very small, yet determined to and make a stand against the overwhelming power of the huge Persian army. The small Greek force, made up of only 300 Spartans, and about 6,000 soldiers from other Greek city-states, faced a Persian army of perhaps 100,000 men. At the narrow pass called Thermopylae, the Greeks fought heroically for two days, turning back wave after wave of Persian invaders. The Persians failed to seize the narrow pass at Thermopylae, but ultimately the Persians surrounded the Greeks from an alternate angle. 300 Spartans fought valiantly to their death, refusing to flee. They were finally overwhelmed by the Persian army, after inflicting serious casualties on their enemy.

The story of Thermopylae is told in Herodotus, a classical source Thoreau would have known. It is a tale of unwavering resistance against all odds, a story of victory-in-defeat. Although the Greeks lost the battle of Thermopylae, they ultimately won the war. Such a tale of 300 Spartans, hailing from freedom-loving Greece, who stood up to defend their own most sacred values from the invasion of a more autocratic force: this is not unlike Thoreau's mature philosophy of education and reading. Thoreau used ancient classics as fighting words. His engagement with Harvard classicism had a sharp double edge. Thoreau saw the activity of reading as a way to challenge the authority of nineteenth-century dominant culture, a way to speak out, and fight back, refusing to accept the master narrative of antebellum society. Thoreau viewed liberal learning as a form of individual empowerment, and he saw reading as a rise to authority. In this sense, the transcendentalists as a group viewed higher learning as a creative intellectual pursuit that carries with it "real-world" social and political consequences.[67] The following

[67] AAC&U, "What is a 21st Century Liberal Education?," 2015.

dissertation explores how this idea came about. I conclude by suggesting how transcendental higher learning can help guide our own pursuit of liberal arts education in the twenty-first century.

Chapter One

Ancient Classics and The American Scholar

Emerson is not remembered as an advocate of Greek and Latin learning. But in many ways he remained a Harvard classicist throughout his whole life. At the ripe age of sixty-four, Emerson renewed his formal relationship with the Harvard. After a twenty-nine year exile from the college, he was appointed to the Harvard Board of Overseers of 1867, and he delivered the annual Phi Beta Kappa lecture in August.[1] Emerson delivered eighty public lectures in 1867 and published a new book of poems. He travelled out west twice, engaging audiences as far away as Minnesota and Iowa. By 1867 Emerson had reached the pinnacle of his intellectual career. His major work was behind him.

In July Emerson paused to commemorate the life of a lesser known American scholar. His aunt, Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, died in her sleep on July 25.[2] Emerson penned her obituary, which appeared in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* on July 31. His tribute is glowing. Mrs. Ripley's "brothers, younger than herself, were scholars," Emerson explains, "but her own taste for study was even more decided. At a time when perhaps no other young woman read Greek, she acquired the language with ease and read Plato, — adding soon the advantage of German commentators. After her marriage, when her husband, the well-known clergyman of Waltham, received boys in his house to be

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[1] Emerson was banned from speaking at Harvard following the "Divinity School Address," which he delivered on Sunday evening, July 15, 1838 — a year after he gave his first Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard, better known as "The American Scholar" address. For the broader context and public response to both "The American Scholar" and Divinity School address, see Packer, chaps. 4 and 5 and Gura, chaps. 3 and 4.

[2] Qtd. in Goodwin, 1-3.

fitted for college," Mrs. Ripley "assumed the advanced instruction in Greek and Latin, and did not fail to turn it to account by extending her studies in the literature of both languages. It soon happened," Emerson continues,

> that students from Cambridge were put under her private instruction and oversight. If the young men shared her delight in the book, she was interested at once to lead them to higher steps and more difficult but not less engaging authors, and they soon learned to price the new world of thought and history thus opened. Her best pupils became her lasting friends. She became one of the best Greek scholars in the country, and continued, in her latest years, the habit of reading Homer, the tragedians, and Plato. But her studies took a wide range in mathematics, in natural philosophy, in psychology, in theology, as well as in ancient and modern literature. She had always a keen ear open to whatever new facts astronomy, chemistry, or the theories of light and heat had to furnish. Any knowledge, all knowledge, was welcome. Her stores increased day by day. She was absolutely without pedantry. Nobody ever heard her learning until a necessity came for its use, and then nothing could be more simple than her solution of the problem proposed to her. The most intellectual gladly conversed with one whose knowledge, however rich and varied, was always with her only the means of new acquisition. Meantime, her mind was purely receptive.[3]

Mrs. Ripley pilfered hours day and night to cultivate such "wide and successful study." Yet she never shirked a "household task." "She was faithful to all the duties of wife and mother in a well-ordered and eminently hospitable household." Despite the daily pressures of domestic work, in short, Emerson's aunt achieved a "rich and varied" life of the mind. "If there was conversation, if there were thought or learning, her interest was commanded, and she gave herself up to the happiness of the hour."[4] Mrs. Ripley pursued higher learning with quasi-religious devotion, in Emerson's portrait. Her knowledge ranged far and wide, and even "in her latest years" she never gave up her "habit" of

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[3] Goodwin, 2.

[4] Goodwin, 2-3.

reading the ancient Greek and Latin classics.[5]

Emerson's praise of Mrs. Ripley reflects intellectual values that stayed with him his whole life. Much like the Harvard classicists mentioned in my introduction, Emerson viewed the study of ancient languages and literature as strong foundation for "broad-gauged, widely diffused learning."[6] He portrays Mrs. Ripley as "one of the best Greek scholars in the country," a female classicist who devoted her own life to "thoughtful intellectual wandering."[7] Emerson's audience would have recognized the connection he was drawing to the culture of Harvard classicism. Cornelius Felton's posthumous masterpiece, his collection of public lectures titled *Greece, Ancient and Modern*, was published the same year as Mrs. Ripley's death. This work was widely recognized as "essential service to that cause of liberal culture to which" Felton's "whole life was consecrated."[8]

Emerson's idea of the American scholar, as he developed it beginning in the 1830s, bears strong resemblance to the new humanist ideals he still held in 1867. Most commentators view Emerson's philosophy of education as distinctly anti-institutional, but he drew heavily, throughout his life, on the culture of classicism that emanated from

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[5] Emerson's other aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, was also a deeply learned classical scholar. She too dedicated her life to active reading and writing, that is, a style of higher learning that displayed an astonishing level of "intellectual sympathy" with the world of ideas around her. For a fascinating account of Mary Moody Emerson's influence on her nephew, see Cole.

[6] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19. The quotation is from Winterer's description of the intellectual milieu in greater Boston throughout the early nineteenth-century.

[7] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19. The best account of female classicism in the United States is Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity*. Winterer does not mention Sarah Ripley but does mention Margaret Fuller. See *The Mirror of Antiquity*, 150-151.

[8] Felton, *Greece, Ancient and Modern*, iii.

Harvard throughout the early nineteenth century.[9] Emerson viewed creative reading as a form of imaginative travel, first and foremost, a variety of antimaterialism that cannot be counted, cut up, commodified, and construed solely in terms of markets and money. This idea can be traced to the influence of Harvard new humanists, whose innovative style of teaching and learning took antebellum New England by storm beginning in the 1820s and 30s.[10]

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[9] Lawrence Buell, for example, characterizes Emerson as "the first public intellectual in the United States," though Buell does not consider the role romantic humanism and the classical college in the development of Emerson's education philosophy (*Emerson*, 1). Buell claims that Emerson "opened up the prospects of a much more profound sense of the nature, challenge, and promise of mental emancipation, whatever one's race, sex, or nation might be" (5). He interprets Emersonian self-reliance as a kind of nineteenth-century liberation theology. "For Emerson, the key was to jolt individuals into realizing the untapped powers of energy, knowledge, and creativity of which all people, at least in principle, are capable. He too hated all systems of human oppression; but his central project, and the basis of his legacy, was to unchain individual minds" (9). Other commentators discuss the history of Emerson's ideas about education and the American scholar but barely mention the context of classical learning. In *Understanding Emerson: "The American Scholar" and His Struggle for Self-Reliance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Kenneth S. Sacks, a classicist himself, shows how Emerson built on the traditions of Unitarian thought. Yet Sacks ultimately argues that Emerson developed "an entirely new interpretation of what it meant to be an American scholar" (21). In *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), Robert D. Richardson does a better job describing the long-term influence of Emerson's engagement with romantic classicism. "As much as Emerson recognized the claims of the classics ('It is always an economy of time to read old books'), he opposed the passive ingestion and approval of canonical texts just because they were famous" (11). "Emerson read for personal gain," Richardson explains, "for personal use" (11). "Of the books which had moved him personally he could write with open gratitude and a clear sense of feeling transported" (9). Yet Richardson only hints at the relationship between Emerson's dynamic, intuitive approach to books and learning, on the one hand, and the teaching of Harvard new humanism on the other. See also, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, chap. 3.

[10] My understanding of antebellum academic and intellectual culture relies on Caroline Winterer's account in *The Culture of Classicism*, especially 44-114 Also see Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience* and Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton*, especially chaps. 1 and 2.

Edward Everett was no doubt an important early influence on the life and mind of Ralph Waldo Emerson.[11] But Cornelius Felton provides a more comprehensive portrait of Harvard classicism as it evolved throughout the early nineteenth century. Felton was a leading presence at Harvard during the height of the transcendentalist movement. He rose quickly through the ranks at Harvard beginning in 1830. In 1860, Felton became President of the University. He tutored Emerson's daughter, Ellen, and served as secretary for the Phi Beta Kappa society in Cambridge. Felton penned the letter inviting Emerson to deliver "The American Scholar" address in the summer of 1837. He was a member of the Saturday Club, and translated the work of German poet and literary historian, Wolfgang Menzel, for George Ripley's *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature*. "Felton was a man of wide-ranging interests, with a particularly strong commitment to science and the visual arts," according to one biographer.[12] He was a living example of "higher" learning, the kind of rich and varied intellectual life pursued by Emerson and the transcendentalists.

While still a young American scholar, in 1830, Felton delivered a public lecture "On Classical Learning." This lecture neatly distills the new humanist educational ideals that Emerson and Thoreau later adopted. The Harvard classicists *and* New England transcendentalists viewed creative reading as a variety of antimaterialism, a way to challenge what they saw as antebellum society's obsession with crass getting and

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[11] See Richardson, *The Mind on Fire*, chap. 3. Everett left his Harvard teaching post in 1824, though he remained an important presence at the college, first as a member of the Board of Overseers, and then as Harvard President from 1846-1849.

[12] C. P. Seabrook Wilkinson, "Cornelius Conway Felton," in *The American Renaissance in New England, Third Series*, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol. 235, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Detroit: Gale Group, 2011), 3.

spending. This notion helped pave the way for Thoreau's mature theory of education as a tool not just for antimaterialism, but a weapon — a kind of rhetorical tool — in his ongoing battle with the institution of slavery as well.

Felton's theory of classical learning was not so radical. "On Classical Learning" does, however, have a social agenda. Felton delivered his speech during the summer of 1830 at the newly formed American Institute of Instruction. His lecture was published in a collection of conference proceedings the following year.[13] The American Institute got its start in March of 1830, according to organizers. The group aimed to discuss "the condition and wants of schools, in different parts of the New England States." After a constitution was developed, the institute planned its inaugural convention for August — inviting a range of school leaders from around the nation. "No country has so great an interest in the education of its citizens," conference leaders explained. "Not only private welfare and happiness, and the advancement of the arts and sciences, but the institutions of public justice, the privileges of religious and civil liberty, and our very existence as a free republic, depend on a high state of moral and intellectual culture."[14]

Felton's lecture places classical learning at the heart of moral and intellectual reform in the nineteenth-century United States. "The subject of classical learning is one

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[13] I have found no evidence that Emerson (or Thoreau) attended Felton's lecture in "On Classical Learning" in the summer of 1830. Emerson was elected to the Boston School Committee in December, and his cousin, George Barrell Emerson, was active in the organization that created the American Institute for Instruction in March. In 1830, Thoreau was still three years from entering Harvard College as a freshman. For the full text of Felton's lecture, see *The Introductory Discourse and Lectures Delivered in Boston, Before the Convention of Teachers, and Other Friends of Education, Assembled to Form the American Institute of Instruction, August 1830* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1831), 302-332. Hereafter cited within the body of my text accompanied by the abbreviation *OCL*.

[14] "Preface," in *The Introductory Discourse and Lectures*, iii.

of immense importance, when considered in all its bearings upon the intellectual culture of our times," Felton writes, in an open letter that introduces the published text of his lecture (*OCL*, 303). He does not wish to dig up old wounds associated with the battle of the books, Felton explains, in the opening salvo of "On Classical Learning." Still it surprises him that classical learning can be so routinely disparaged in his own time. As the United States reached new levels of economic and industrial growth, classical learning came under increasing pressure. New humanist thinkers like Cornelius Felton vigorously defended liberal arts education, while many American citizens called for more "practical" forms of instruction, which they argued would contribute more palpably to the material growth of the nation.[15] Harvard classicists were not so easily convinced. In his lecture "On Classical Learning," Felton recognizes "the revolutionary character of the present age" (*OCL*, 306). He sees in the modern world "a strong tendency to overturn old systems, however hallowed" (*OCL*, 306). Felton recognizes the impulse "to carry the work of revolution and reform from the halls of legislation to the halls of learning" (*OCL*, 306). But this does not mean, in his view, that American students should abandon the past in favor of modern achievements. American citizens must not be blinded by selfish belief in the superiority of their own modern culture. Felton argues for a more open, broad-minded historical view — a vision, he claims, that is "eminently practical" (*OCL*, 316). American students must open themselves up to fully experience the depth of ancient texts and authors. By "transporting ourselves back to the time when they lived," American scholars can learn to appreciate the achievement of cultures far distant from their own.

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[15] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, especially chaps 2 and 3.

Modern advancements have "taught men to examine, compare, think, decide and act for themselves," Felton explains (*OCL*, 306). This does *not* mean, however, we should "neglect too much the old land-marks, and make ship wreck on the ocean of change" (*OCL*, 306). Instead of abandoning classical education in favor of more "practical" pursuits, driven by blind obsession with material advancement, Felton argues for deeper aesthetic appreciation and wide-angled historical knowledge. The "intellectual effort of comprehending the entire work of an author" is not, in Felton's view, a narrow-minded or materialist pursuit. "It is not enough barely to give . . . [ancient] works a hasty perusal, or even a careful perusal with a knowledge of the language simply," he argues (*OCL*, 314). One must learn to *think along with* the ancient classics. Felton's approach involves lifetime commitment to hard work of sympathetic imagination. "The student who would enter fully into the merits of a classical author," he lectures, "must take himself out of the influences immediately around him" (*OCL*, 314). A true American scholar "must transport himself back to a remote age; must lay aside the associations most familiar to him; must forget his country, his prejudices, his superior light, and place himself upon a level with the intellect whose labors he essays to comprehend" (*OCL*, 314-15).

Felton encouraged his students to place themselves "within the object" of history.[16] Direct engagement with the past can save antebellum students from becoming

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[16] Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 427. In his account of the astonishingly rich and varied intellectual life of William James, Robert Richardson mentions the German term *Einfulung*, which is very much relevant to Cornelius Felton's approach to books and reading in his 1830 lecture on "Classical Learning." The term comes up in Robert D. Richardson's discussion of James's interest in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. "What is really needed," Richardson explains, "is what Bergson variously calls 'metaphysical

too caught up — too constrained — by the narrow limits of their own time. Rich and varied historical pursuit leads to the expansion of individual perspectives — the ability to see outside the boundaries of one's own society and culture, Felton argues. His ideal classical scholar abandons familiar surroundings, in this sense, as if to operate within the "flow" of history. "Few are the minds that would not be benefited by such a process," Felton proclaims (*OCL*, 315.) "We are disposed to permit our thoughts and feelings to repose too much upon the objects nearest us; and thus a constant reference to self becomes the habitual direction of our thoughts" (*OCL*, 315). Reading is a kind of voyaging out, in Felton's portrait. It is a kind of movement *into* the ideas of other people and away from "associations most familiar to" us.

Felton conceives the activity of reading as a back-and-forth movement between past and present, a variety of "alienation and return," "in which the mind continually

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intuition,' 'that intellectual sympathy which we call intuition,' or 'a kind of intellectual auscultation.' It is a direct way of knowing, which works by 'placing oneself within the object itself by an effort of intuition,' which avoids symbols and is an alternative to conceptual thought. It is a mode of knowing that would soon be called *Einfuhlung*, or empathy, a process for which words were first found in the opening decade of the twentieth century" (427). In an accompanying footnote, Richardson continues: "*Einfuhlung* was coined in 1903 by Thoedor Lipps, who thought that the perception of another person's emotional expression or gesture automatically activates the same emotion in the perceiver. . . . The word "empathy" shortly thereafter appeared in English. Though the term is fairly new, the idea strongly resembles John Keats's notion of negative capability and Henry Thoreau's remark that 'the highest we can attain to is not knowledge but sympathy with intelligence'" (n. 17, 575). Felton's own concept of sympathetic reading also has a strong family resemblance. In his essay "The Hermeneutical Turn in American Critical Theory, 1830-1860," M. D. Walhout attributes the term "*Einfuhlung*" to Herder, thus tracing the concept to a much earlier origin than Robert D. Richardson. To Walhout, the concept of "*Einfuhlung*" or empathy reflects a new kind of interpretation, introduced to the United States via James Marsh's edition of *Aids to Reflection* and Marsh's translations and essays on Herder. See my discussion of Herder below.

stretches beyond its ordinary point of view."[17] His vision aligns with broader themes in the new humanist movement of the nineteenth century. Theories of education as human development, or as moral cultivation and perspective enlargement, so to speak, reach back to the German tradition of *Bildung*, and probably further on back to Renaissance historicism, and the development of textual scholarship in the ancient world, according to intellectual historians.[18] "Learning requires a passionate search for continual growth tempered by reason that is developed through intense study of one's cultural history," write James A. Good and Jim Garrison, summarizing the *Bildung* tradition as it developed in German thought, especially the philosophy of Hegel. "Fulfillment comes through practical activity that promotes the development of one's talents and abilities as well as the development of one's society. Rather than acceptance of the sociopolitical status quo, *Bildung* requires the ability to engage in immanent critique of one's society, challenging it to actualize its own highest ideals."[19] Felton channels this basic approach

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[17] James A. Good and Jim Garrison, "Traces of Hegelian *Bildung* in Dewey's Philosophy," *Dewey and Continental Philosophy* (2010), 51.

[18] See especially James Turner, *Philology*, Parts I and II.

[19] Good and Garrison, "Traces," 53-54. According to Good and Garrison, Hegel connected with the *Bildung* tradition via Goethe—and Goethe via Herder and further on back. "Hegel followed Goethe's lead by claiming each person must find his or her vocation and, at the same time, by arguing that education should prepare students for life rather than merely for narrowly defined jobs," according to this view. "Education is a dialectical process of alienation and return, according to Hegel, in which the mind continually stretches beyond its ordinary point of view. He sought to accomplish this by alienating the child's mind from its received point of view through the study of the ancient world and its languages. Ancient civilizations are sufficiently alien, he claimed, to separate children form their natural state but sufficiently close to their own language and world for them to return to themselves enlarged and transformed. The goal of education was to help students realize the ideal of modernity, which is for the individual to become a self-directed, self-formed person" ("Traces," 51-52). See also James A.

to "higher" learning. In Felton's portrait reading is a form of individual empowerment, a variety of self-cultivation that leads to social reform. Historians have traced the concept of *Bildung* to the new humanist ideas of Herder, whose influential work *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* was introduced to American audiences by Professor James Marsh beginning in 1826.[20] To fully understand the spirit of ancient Hebrew poetry, Herder argued, one must "be prepared to understand why they thought, and felt, and wrote as they did; and if . . . [the scholar obtains] the feeling and inspiration of the poet, he will sympathize with their emotions, and the living spirit of their poetry will be kindled up in his own imagination."[21] Felton portrays reading in this same sense, as an essentially imaginative process.

One must learn to read with empathy, or *Einfuhlung*, Felton implies. His theory of reading the ancient classics, like Herder's concept of "entering into" the spirit of Hebrew poetry, is "a direct way of knowing," one that "works by 'placing oneself within the object" of history "by an effort of intuition.'"[22] The result is a feeling of

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Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The "Permanent Hegelian Deposit" in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).

[20] James A. Good, online paper "The German *Bildung* Tradition." See also "James Marsh, Cultural Mediator and Transcendentalist Thinker: Understanding 'Reason and Understanding," in *The Internationality of National Literatures in Either America: Transfer and Transformation*, Vol. 1, British America and the United States, 17702-1850s, ed. Armin Paul Frank and Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (Gottingen: Verlag, 2000), 251-266. The significance of Marsh's American translation of Herder has not been sufficiently recognized by historians of education in the United States. Herder's historicism, mediated by Marsh, played a key role in the development of transcendentalist views of education and reading.

[21] Qtd. in Walhout, 692.

[22] Richardson, *In the Maelstrom of Modernism*, 427. According to Richardson, "William James believed not just that our minds are active rather than passive but that mind *is*

transcendence, and the ability to engage in immanent critique of one's own society and culture. Felton's account of creative reading is a romantic concept, one that is open to the criticism of what scholars have called "the romantic ideology."[23] The notion that one can "enter into" the spirit of the past, as a way to shed the skin of modernity, was nonetheless an integral part of the intellectual landscape in antebellum America. Felton has high hopes for creative reading, framed as an imaginative kind of labor that resists more monotonous, increasingly industrial varieties of work. Yet "such is not often the path followed by scholars of our country," Felton declares (*OCL*, 315). He "believe[d] that the worth of classical learning will never be realized until some such method is adopted" (*OCL*, 315). Felton's approach "involves a depth of thought and a wide range of studies, from which we are apt to shrink in alarm" (*OCL*, 315). We may "ask ourselves if there is not some shorter way to attain the object" of liberal education (*OCL*, 315). Yet there is no shortcut to the new humanist frame of mind advocated by Professor Felton and his Harvard colleagues. Lifelong devotion to the pursuit of broad-gauged inquiry "is the price of genuine classical erudition" (*OCL*, 315).

Such lifelong pursuit will lead American society beyond its path of petty materialistic indulgence. "Knowledge of the sort I have described," Felton proclaims in 1830,

> may not lead to the invention of a single new mechanical agent; it may not be the direct means of increasing our fortunes a single dollar. But it will

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activity. Nothing in our experience, for James, is really passive — not sleep, not hypnotic trance, not habit, not instinct, and least of all temperament" (xiii). In this sense James was an active, creative reader — much like Emerson and the nineteenth-century Harvard classicists.

[23] See Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

> give us an enlarged view of our nature; it will disclose the workings of our common powers under influences widely differing from any that have acted upon ourselves; it will teach us to judge charitably of others' minds and hearts; it will teach us that intellect, and sensibility, and genius, have existed beyond the narrow circle in which we have moved — beyond the limits of our country — centuries before our age. Such lessons are needed in the everyday concerns of life" (*OCL*, 315-16).

Felton describes a model of higher learning very close to the theory Emerson and Thoreau both adopted. The "lessons" Felton aims to teach cannot be learned by drilling and rote. A true scholar must throw him or herself — headlong — into the broad space and deep time of human thought and culture.[24] Readers, at this point, will no doubt recall Emerson's opening lines in his first book *Nature*. "Our age is retrospective," Emerson complains. "It builds on the sepulchers of the fathers."[25] Yet Emerson at the same time remained a lifelong student of "intellect, and sensibility, and genius" that "existed beyond the narrow circle in which" he "moved." In many ways, Emerson's writing is the record of his wide and eager, deeply imaginative reading.[26] His first book is grounded in the study of ancient classics. Most readers recognize that Emerson's vision in *Nature* is "compatible with classical Stoicism."[27] "I go to Shakespear, Goethe, Swift, and even Tennyson," Emerson mused in his journal the same year he published *Nature*, and "submit myself to them, become merely an organ of hearing, & yield to the law of their being. I am paid for thus being nothing by . . . An entirely new mind & thus a Proteus I

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[24] For the term and concept of "deep time," see Dimock, *Through Other Continents* and Dimock and Buell, ed., *Shades of the Planet*.

[25] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 7.

[26] See Richardson, *First We Read, Then We Write*.

[27] Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 226.

enjoy the Universe through the powers & organs of a hundred different men."[28] Emerson learned to project himself *out and into* the mind of ancient thinkers and modern authors, approaching books and reading with the same imaginative energy as antebellum new humanist scholars.

Female transcendentalists like Sarah Ripley approached books and reading the same way. The "higher" learning of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Emerson's other deeply learned aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, also arguably surpassed the liberal education of Cornelius Felton and the Harvard classicists. As mentioned in my introduction, Elizabeth Peabody conceived reading as a form of individual empowerment. In her "Vision," published in 1843, Peabody sees "not only the real personages of history, but the fictitious beings of poetry and romance — equally palpable —" become suddenly "present" to her.[29] In much the same fashion, Felton's 1830 lecture celebrates the grandeur of ancient Greek poetry, especially the epics of Homer, and tragic Greek drama, the latter of which Felton proclaims the "most singular and beautiful manifestation of Grecian genius" (*OCL*, 317) Felton praises the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as well as the genius of Socrates. His most striking description of sympathetic reading, however, comes in the middle of his soaring praise for Demosthenes. Felton's account of "entering into the spirit" of ancient Greek oratory has much in common with the imaginative approach to books and learning adopted by Emerson, Peabody, Thoreau, and a range of other New England transcendentalists. "The orations of Demosthenes afford an admirable study, both to discipline and arouse the mind," Felton lectures, toward the end

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[28] Qtd. in Merton Sealts, Jr., *Emerson on the Scholar* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 71.

[29] Peabody, "A Vision," 13.

of "On Classical Learning." "It requires no little labor to acquire the power of entering into their spirit fully. They must be studied until the train of thought, the peculiar expressions, and the general character of the whole are perfectly familiar; and then it is impossible for any one, who feels the power of eloquence, not to be borne irresistibly along by their impetuous torrents of thought, argument, and illustration" (*OCL*, 326). Felton includes a Latin quotation from the work of Daniel Albert Wyttenbach (1746-1820), "one of the most distinguished classical scholars the continent of Europe has lately produced" (*OCL*, 326). In a footnote to the published version of his lecture, Felton translates Wyttenbach's own account of reading Demosthenes. To both scholars, Wyttenbach and Felton, the experience of reading is an "irresistibly" transformative one:

> Lo! As I re-peruse the orator's pages, a new and before unknown feeling penetrates my mind. Before this time, in reading other authors, I had derived, from understanding them, gratification and delight, both in comprehending the train of thought and language, and in observing my own advancement. Now, an unusual, a more than human excitement rushes upon me, and grows stronger by every repeated reading. I see the orator ardent, indignant, hurried by the flow of his eloquence. I am enkindled myself, and borne along by the same mighty impulse. I become loftier, and am no longer the man I was: I seem to myself to be Demosthenes, standing upon the tribunal, pronouncing that same oration, exhorting the assembled Athenians to imitate the valor and win the glory of their ancestors. I read no longer silently, as I had begun, but aloud. I am led unconsciously to raise my voice, by the clearness and fervor of his sentiments, and the power of his rhetorical harmony. (*OCL*, 326)

What D. A. Wyttenbach describes, in Felton's translation, is the experience of sympathetic reading. Wyttenbach is inspired: he becomes fully "enkindled," "borne along by the same mighty impulse" as the ancient Greek orator himself. Just as Herder feels "the living spirit" of ancient Hebrew poetry "will be kindled up in his own imagination," and Felton, too, describes the feeling of becoming caught up, "borne irresistibly along" by the experience of reading ancient classics, Wyttenbach describes

reading as a form of imaginative travel — a thrilling journey in which he is transported back into the spirit of the remote past. Both Felton and Wyttenbach describes an inrush of "spirit," not unlike what Elizabeth Peabody experienced, when "The pictures of which Pausanius gives an account, and which I supposed lost long ago, were before me, not only in all their original coloring, but even alive as they were not on the canvas."[30] Such an experience of creative reading renders a true scholar momentarily outside the boundaries of space and time. Emerson "submit[s] himself to ancient and modern authors, and become[s] merely an organ of hearing." He too seems somehow no longer himself. Mrs. Ripley also experiences higher learning as a form of transcendence, one that raises her above the pressures of domestic work. "If there was conversation, if there were thought or learning, her interest was commanded, and she gave herself up to the happiness of the hour."[31]

What all these scholars describe is the ecstasy of creative intellectual life. The experience of reading carries with it a certain life-altering potential. "The word ecstasy means 'a displacement,' a standing outside oneself," Robert D. Richardson explains. "Ecstasy names 'a range of experiences characterized by being joyful, transitory, unexpected, rare, valued, and extraordinary to the point of seeming as if derived from a preternatural source.'"[32] A feeling of ecstasy marks the summit of transcendental higher learning. Thoreau describes higher learning as a form of transcendence that allows him to criticize his own society in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*,

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[30] Peabody, "A Vision," 13.

[31] Goodwin, 2.

[32] Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 353.

as we will see in later chapters. Wide and eager reading is a more richly textured, deeply meaningful way to live, in Thoreau's portrait. The German scholar Wyttenbach achieves just such a high level of "gratification and delight" when he reads the ancient lines of Demosthenes, according to Felton's translation. When Wyttenbach reads Demosthenes, "a new and before unknown feeling penetrates" his "mind." His response seems physical, even bodily: "a more than human excitement rushes upon" him, "and grows stronger by every repeated reading." Thoreau describes a similar inrush of energy in the winter of 1841, when he says that a truly "inspiring volume hardly leaves" him "leisure to finish its latter pages" (*PJ1*, 268). A great book's "teachings" must "be practiced," Thoreau explains in his journal (*PJ1*, 268). For what he "began by reading," he must "finish by acting" (*PJ1*, 268).

Felton includes the quotation from Wyttenbach as part of the final flourish of his lecture "On Classical Learning." "It would be useless for me to attempt a full and just exposition of the claims of Grecian genius upon our studious attention," he observes. "As I have before remarked, a detailed and philosophical history would alone unfold all the relations, in which a familiar acquaintance with its masterly excellences would benefit the mind, and prepare it for future usefulness in the actual world around it" (*OCL*, 327). At the time of his lecture, in 1830, Felton's long career at Harvard was still ahead of him. "I cannot help adverting to the high moral effects of a classical course of study, upon the heart and character," he muses (*OCL*, 327). Felton concludes by confirming the "moral and intellectual" usefulness of ancient classics in the nineteenth century. American teachers and scholars alike must "take up" the broadest possible view of the past: "we must take up the general study of antiquity," Felton proclaims, and "read

authors connectedly and entirely — illustrate them by philosophy, politics, geography, history, customs and manners, mythology and religion" (*OCL*, 329-30). In the firm voice of an education reformer, Felton argues "it is evident a general change must be made, and that change must begin somewhere. Those who are devoted to the business of instruction must enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics, than has been common among us in these latter times. We must put forth our best energies to master the treasures of learning, and awaken in our pupils an enthusiasm for similar pursuits" (*OCL*, 330-331). Felton's lecture "On Classical Learning" now reaches a fever pitch. "No great object has ever been achieved, no glorious enterprise has ever been accomplished, without the inspiration of an enthusiastic soul to lead onward — to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles. No halfway devotion of the powers will win that success which a man of genius may be proud of, in this laborious career" (*OCL*, 331).

The "career" Felton has in mind is that of a "man of letters," a teacher, a philologist, "an enthusiastic soul" who finds "inspiration" in the model of German new humanist learning imported to the United States by antebellum intellectuals including Edward Everett, George Ticknor, Frederic Henry Hedge, and George Bancroft. These prophets of higher learning helped forge the language through which Felton defends his own concept of broad-gauged classical education. Felton must have known Mrs. Ripley, who took Harvard students under her own private instruction, according to Emerson in 1867. Felton almost certainly would not have recognized a woman as "one of the best Greek scholars in the country." Felton never seems to have recognized the classical college roots of Emerson's philosophy of education, though later we will see a small hint

of recognition. "In the whole circle of learned professions," Felton concludes, "I know of none which presents nobler topics of eloquence, more exciting and elevating subjects of reflection — and, I may add, more useful fields of labor, than that of a man of letters. Indolence and stupidity have no part nor lot here — every power is called upon — every moral feeling is confirmed — and every honorable aspiration may be gratified" (*OCL*, 331).

Felton and his Harvard colleagues admired the tremendous intellectual energy of Gottingen scholars like Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and F.A. Wolf, who made lasting impressions on American students, including Emerson's older brother, William, who traveled abroad to study in Europe during the early nineteenth century. William heard Eichhorn lecture in person, and he wrote his brother about the experience. At such an exciting moment of cultural and intellectual ferment, Felton's lecture "On Classical Learning" captures the new humanist ideas that thrilled so many antebellum intellectuals. Felton depicts his ideal American scholar as "a man of genius," a kind of romantic and new humanist hero, one who "lead[s] onward — to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles" *(OCL*, 331). Emerson builds on this image in "The American Scholar." Emerson's famous Phi Beta Kappa address, delivered at the invitation of Cornelius Felton himself, delivers a new humanist message of its own.

"The American Scholar" was not Emerson's only public statement on the topic of education in the late 1830s. Two months before he delivered "The American Scholar" address, Emerson gave a fiery speech at the new Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island. Just over a year later, on July 24, 1838, Emerson delivered an address on

"Literary Ethics" at Dartmouth College, in New Hampshire. Together these lectures — Emerson's Greene Street School address, "The American Scholar," and "Literary Ethics" — amplify the argument of new humanist reformers like Edward Everett and Cornelius Felton. All three lectures make an extended argument about how best to read and learn. They paint a picture of creative reading as a form of intellectual sympathy, a kind of imaginative travel *out and into* the ideas of other people.

Two themes — imaginative openness and antimaterialism — animate Emerson's thinking about education in the late 1830s. His view of "higher" learning as a tool for social criticism evolved throughout the course of his life, but Emerson's theory of romantic new humanism reached a new height in 1837, in the context of financial crisis. Banks and businesses continued to close around greater Boston throughout the summer and fall of that year, as the United States entered severe economic depression. The Panic of 1837 struck the Emerson family directly. Beginning in the winter of 1836, Emerson's brother William needed money to cover significant debts. Emerson worked feverishly to save his brother from financial losses. He was deeply worried about the whole country's ability to balance its books and make good on financial commitments. Emerson's Greene Street School address, delivered on June 10, 1837, paints "thoughtful intellectual wandering" — transcendental higher learning — as a viable alternative to the rampant materialism that he believed threatened the nation at the time.[33]

Emerson argues for the redemptive power of American education. He juxtaposes the moral and spiritual elevation of "true Education" with antebellum society's economic and business culture (*EL*, 2:203). At the beginning of the Greene Street School lecture,

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[33] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19.

Emerson announces that he will "offer" his own "thoughts upon the defects that show daily more glaring in our systems of teaching" and learning (*EL*, 2:195). "It even seems to me," he proclaims, "that the peculiar aspects of the times draw new attention to the subject of Education. They seem to advertise us of some radical errors somewhere. They afford, as great calamities often will, rare facilities to the philosopher in his inquiries" (*EL*, 2:195).

Such "radical errors," in Emerson's portrait, are linked to the materialistic mindset of his country. Emerson interprets American economic woes as a sign of modern society's downfall, an indication of the "degradation of man" (*EL*, 2:197). He paints "higher" learning as a functional alternative, an activity that, if pursued with quasi-religious fervor, will help heal the wounds inflicted by modern market society. The path of "true education" cultivates human potential to the fullest possible extent, despite common concerns associated with the fluctuation of money and the fast pace of an emergent capitalist economy. Before making this point, Emerson describes how far antebellum Americans have fallen. They are short-sighted. "The disease of which the world lies sick," Emerson proclaims, "is the inaction of the higher faculties of man; — the usurpation by the Senses of the entire practical energy of individuals, and the consequent prevalence of low and unworthy views of the manly character" (*EL*, 2:196). Renewed commitment to the cultivation of "higher faculties" will raise the human spirit above the destructive economic circumstances of the time. Cornelius Felton articulates a vision very close to this ideal in "On Classical Learning." The moral and aesthetic process of losing oneself in books, the very experience of transcendental higher learning, has the power to transport American students and scholars beyond the narrow circle in

which they live.

Higher education is not merely an escape from modern troubles. Wide and eager reading strengthens the mind and opens the heart, giving American scholars power to confront and challenge the most pressing problems in the world around them. "Men are subject to things," Emerson complains in his Providence lecture (*EL*, 2:196). Yet "Is he learned? He does not use learning as an instrument, but he looks upon learning as an established thing of good fame in society, and passively acquires all that is reputed such" (*EL*, 2:196). A typical American student "regards Wealth, and so a profession, and the offices of power," as "the goods which he is to get; *they* are absolute value; *he* is only valuable as he may have skill to win these; and so thinking, he becomes not their master but their slave. He is a Lexicon. He is a money chest. He is the treadle of a factory-wheel" (*EL*, 2:196). In this part of his Providence address, Emerson uses language he would further develop two months later in "The American Scholar" lecture. His point is similar to the argument of Wesleyan University President Michael S. Roth in 2014. "If higher education is conceived only as a job-placement program for positions with which we are already familiar," Roth argues, "then liberal learning does not make much sense. But if higher education is to be an intellectual and experiential adventure and not a bureaucratic assignment of skill capacity, if it is to prize free inquiry rather than training for 'the specific vocations to which [students] are destined,' then we must resist the call to limit access to it or to diminish its scope."[34]

Emerson claims that American education is in danger of losing its focus on free inquiry, thereby diminishing its scope. His goal is to bless the Greene Street School —

[34] Roth, 8.

and establish his own theory of higher learning — in opposition to theories of education that filter power and authority from the top down, assigning skills and drilling students in a bureaucratic manner. "Is there not even at this time," Emerson asks, "a more than usual torpidity in the high ideal faculties whence always the life, the regeneration of society proceeds? (*EL*, 2:197). In a passage that further anticipates "The American Scholar," Emerson answers his own question:

> An immense prosperity, — an immense activity, that is, of the Senses, and devotion to the Senses, has taken place, without example in history. The riches of nature, the whole active faculty of man, civil or savage, under every clime, have been strained to serve them. In the flush and astonishment of these results, all men shared. In the extent of new countries opened to the population; the magical facilities of transportation, the prodigies of mechanical invention, the creation of property, the dazzling products of the economic arts begot new desire, new industry, new skill in the merchant to possess them. They overpowered in the farmer the still religious tendencies of his primitive employment and drew him to the fervor of the market. They infected even the brain of the scholar and the clerk and tinged the removed dreams of the poet with some hope of the realization of his aims out of mechanical force. (EL, 2:197)

Emerson's thinking here is soaked through with romantic ideology. He was fascinated by the "immense energy" and "prosperity" of the industrial age, but he believed a true scholar simply cannot achieve his proper "aims out of mechanical force." A scholar's "industry," much like the "skill" of a romantic poet, is work of "pure Reason." It is the labor of human intellect and imagination, a journey of continuous growth — the cultivation of a rich and varied life of the mind. Emerson's idea of education rejects what he often depicts as "mechanical" and "market" based forms of learning, the kind of factory style education that Thomas Gradgrind advocates in *Hard Times*, the anti-utilitarian novel of Charles Dickens. Emerson challenges his audience in the Greene Street address to think beyond the material product of teaching and learning. He

challenges his audience to move beyond their own blind pursuit of "Wealth," in order to explore the pure joy of creative intellectual life. Emerson encourages American scholars to take a higher view of human potential, rather than traveling more conventional and well-worn paths to "the offices of power."

Emerson's Providence lecture blasts antebellum business culture, proclaiming that "[a] desperate conservatism clings with both hands to every dead form in the schools, in the state, in the church" (*EL*, 2:197). For "what is the end of human life? It is not," Emerson proclaims, "the chief end of man that he should make a fortune and beget children whose end is likewise to make fortunes, but it is, in a few words, that he should explore himself — an inexhaustible mine — and external nature is but the candle to illuminate in turn the innumerable and profound obscurities of the soul. Do we not see how cunningly for this end he is fitted to the world, to every object in which he hath relation?" (*EL*, 2:199-200). There is more to life than the pursuit of wealth, in short. And there is much more to higher learning than the pursuit of skills that lead to success in the professions only. The most striking passage in Emerson's Greene Street School lecture looks forward, again, to themes Emerson develops in "The American Scholar" and "Literary Ethics." "As every wind draws music out of the aeolian harp," Emerson muses, "so doth every object in nature draw music out of" the American scholar's "mind" (EL, 2:200). Emerson links the experience of higher learning to the creative life of a romantic poet. "He is a harp on which all things play and every new influence brings a new melody therefrom. Is it not true," in these terms, "that every landscape I behold, every friend I meet, every act I perform, every pain I suffer, leaves me a different being from that they found me?" (*EL*, 2:201). Emerson defines education, in fact, as a kind of

"living learning." Isn't it true, he proclaims,

> that poverty, love, authority, anger, sickness, sorrow, success, all work actively upon our being and unlock for us the concealed faculties of the mind? Whatever private petty ends are frustrated, this end is always answered. Whatever he does or whatever befalls him, opens another chamber in his soul, — that is, he has got a new feeling, a new thought, a new organ. What else seeks he in the deep instinct of society, from his first fellowship — a child with children at play, up to the heroic cravings of friendship and love — but to find himself in another mind, to confess himself, to make a clean breast, to be searched and known, because such is the law of his being that only can he find out his own secret through the instrumentality of another mind? What else is a work of art but an experiment upon him educing the perception of beauty and the sublime? For this, he reads a novel or a poem; his fancy kindles, his tears stream, and he is conscious of a new and delicious emotion for which discovery he must thank that idle tale. For this he goes to Faneuil Hall and lets himself be played upon by the enraged eloquence that is native there, — that he may learn with awe what terrific elements slumber within him. (EL, 2:201)

Human experience itself is a kind of creative reading, in Emerson's view. Life is a text, a great book open — waiting to be consumed by an imaginative, "purely receptive" reader. "I dreamed," Emerson once wrote in his journal, "that I floated at will in the great ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, 'this must thou eat.' And I ate the world."[35]

Emerson's hunger for experience was not unlike his insatiable appetite for books. Just as the mind and emotions of the German scholar, D. A. Wyttenbach, are "played upon" by the ancient lines of Demosthenes, Emerson imagines his own scholar opening up to receive everything in the wide world around him. This is not a passive model, but rather an active reception. The result is ecstatic "perception of beauty and the sublime." Emerson's scholar lets himself be played upon by the harp strings of the whole living

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[35] Qtd. in Richardson, *First We Read,* 38.

universe. Such a scholar becomes enlarged. Individual experience — "poverty, love, authority, anger, sickness, sorrow, success" — as well as the creative work of other people, "a novel or poem," all seem to pull magnetically, irresistibly, on the wide-ranging interests of Emerson's American scholar.

This is what it means to conceive education in terms of free inquiry — that is, as a lifelong pursuit of organic growth, and as the activity of a fully living and integrative mind. The world is a vast "puzzle," a "bewildering series of animated forms," which the scholar must integrate in order to become more fully know — and become — himself. Open engagement with a diversity of otherness ("a new feeling, a new thought, a new organ") is what Emerson meant by "true education." In this sense Emerson's vision of higher learning flies in the face of more narrowly materialistic pursuits. Emerson's view of education, as "an intellectual and experiential adventure," rather than the "bureaucratic assignment of skill capacity," is indeed Emerson's core message in "The American Scholar" and "Literary Ethics" as well.

American schools and colleges, Emerson declares in the Greene Street address, fail to cultivate a rich and varied life of the mind. "We teach boys to be such men as we are," Emerson complains (*EL*, 2:). "We do not teach them to aspire to be all they can. We do not give them a training as if we believed in their noble nature . . . . We exercise their understanding to the apprehension and comparison of some facts, to a skill in numbers, in words; we aim to make accountants, attornies, engineers; but not to make able, earnest, greathearted men" (*EL*, 2:). His Providence lecture remains shrouded in the darkness of financial crisis. Yet Emerson has hope for change. "I have hope," Emerson concludes, quoting "the great Leibnitz," "that society may be reformed, when I see how

much education may be reformed" (EL, 2:). For "if the higher faculties of the individual be from time to time quickened, he will gain wisdom and virtue from his business. But if his pursuit degenerates into the love of money he dieth daily, he becomes no man but a money machine" (EL, 2:).

When a student "reads a novel or a poem," in stark contrast, his spirit is redeemed: "his tears stream, and he is conscious of a new and delicious emotion." Emerson's address on "The American Scholar," delivered two months after his Greene Street lecture, combines the threat of depravity with hope for redemption in much the same way. "Public and private avarice," Emerson proclaims, toward the end of "The American Scholar,"

> make the air we breath thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and the complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, — but are hindered form action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust — some of them suicides" (*AS*, 70).

In spite of such darkness, Emerson's Harvard lecture, like his Providence speech, projects a more hopeful vision. "Patience, — patience, — with the shades of all the good and great for company," Emerson lectures toward the end of "The American Scholar," "and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world" (*AS*, 71). "Is not, indeed, every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master?" (*AS*, 54).

When Emerson traveled from Concord to Cambridge, to deliver his Harvard Phi

Beta Kappa lecture, he knew he would be speaking to a cross-section of New England's most powerful cultural and intellectual elite. The response of his audience was far less predictable.

Some members of Emerson's audience were excited by "The American Scholar." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., later deemed Emerson's speech America's intellectual Declaration of Independence. Andrews Norton, dean of Harvard new humanist scholars, hated it.[36] Young Henry Thoreau, who must have read "The American Scholar" when it was printed as a pamphlet, probably did not hear the address in person. On August 30, the day before Emerson delivered "The American Scholar," Thoreau was indeed on the Harvard campus. As part of a student exhibition, Thoreau read a paper on August 30 titled "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times." "In considering the influence of the commercial spirit on the character of the nation," Thoreau declared in his own graduation speech, "we have only to look at its ruling principle. We are to look chiefly for its origin, and the power that still cherishes and sustains it, in a blind and unmanly love of wealth. And is it seriously asked," Thoreau proclaimed, "whether the prevalence of such a spirit can be prejudicial to a community? Wherever it exists it is too sure to become the *ruling*

[36] The historian James Turner has argued that Andrews Norton responded negatively to Emerson's speech because Norton and Emerson had fundamentally different views of language. Turner may be right, but this thesis does not take into account that Norton's approach to history shared a basic family resemblance with Emerson's more radically subjective approach. Andrews Norton is remembered as an enemy of the transcendentalists, but Norton, too, believed that a true American scholar must enter into the spirit of the past. This notion has everything to do with Emerson's idea of history as human culture. For Turner's interpretation, see *Language, Religion, Knowledge* (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). The relationship between Emerson's historicism and the new humanist scholarship of figures like Andrews Norton remains, to my mind, a significant problem in American intellectual history.

spirit, and as a natural consequence, it infuses into all our thoughts and affections a degree of its own selfishness; we become selfish in our patriotism, selfish in our domestic relations, selfish in our religion."[37]

Cornelius Felton should have been proud. Thoreau took a total of five courses in ancient Greek with Professor Felton, along with eight courses in Latin language and literature with the German new humanist scholar, Charles Beck. Thoreau builds his own new humanist argument in "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times." For "the veriest slave of avarice," Thoreau concludes, the most devoted and selfish worshipper of Mammon, is toiling and calculating to some other purpose than the mere acquisition of the good things of this world; he is preparing, gradually and unconsciously it may be, to lead a more intellectual and spiritual life."[38]

Thoreau's speech sounds like Emerson, who picked up the same strain of Harvard new humanist theory the following day. Emerson divided his speech on August 31 into three main parts, which define the American scholar's education "by books, by nature, and by action."[39] All three sections coalesce around the idea of intellectual sympathy, which is the core of Emerson's antimaterialist philosophy of education and reading.

Emerson's description of the scholar's education "by nature," in short, prepares the way for his discussion of creative reading in the second part of "The American

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[37] See Henry D. Thoreau, *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, edited by Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 116, 117-18.

[38] Thoreau, *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, 117-18.

[39] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 63. Citations to "The American Scholar" will subsequently appear within the text of my dissertation, accompanied by the abbreviation AS and page numbers that correspond with the Library of America edition of Emerson's *Essays and Lectures*.

Scholar" address. Both sections emphasize the value of sympathetic, intuitive engagement with objects outside self. Much like in the Greene Street School address, the very process of "higher" learning raises the American scholar above the commercial spirit of modern times. Emerson's scholar must learn to "read" the book of nature, as a way of cultivating "the higher faculties"(EL, 2:). In this sense the first part of "The American Scholar" models the same kind of sympathetic, creative reading that Emerson describes in the second part, when he discusses the value of great books.

At first a young scholar cannot see himself reflected in the changing face of nature, Emerson begins. The universe appears "divided," and every object "stands by itself" (*AS*, 55). "By and by," however, a young scholar's searching mind "finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand" (*AS*, 55). Slowly the mind of a true scholar learns to integrate the disparate "facts" of organic experience, Emerson explains, "and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running underground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem" (*AS*, 55). An ideal scholar grows into recognition that "objects" of the natural world "are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also the law of the human mind" (*AS*, 55). Such recognition marks a special high point in the American scholar's education by nature. Like a romantic poet, Emerson's scholar learns to see unity in diversity. A truly inquiring mind learns to "see into the life of things."[40]

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[40] "As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth," Emerson writes in "The Poet," "so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and,

Emerson tells a Wordsworthian tale of the American scholar's intellectual growth — a story of creative development and the unifying power of sympathetic imagination. The key to moments of heightened experience, or *Einfuhlung*, is active perception of unity in diversity, the scholar-poet's sudden sense of complete identification with the observed. Moments of instant, all-inclusive recognition expand the self, in Emerson's portrait: reading the book of nature is an ecstatic experience. It is an experience of heightened consciousness that critics of "the romantic ideology" have debunked but Emerson and Thoreau endorsed throughout the early nineteenth century.[41] If Cornelius Felton's heroic classical scholar communes with the spirit of great books and authors, Emerson's "man of genius" in "The American Scholar" reaches out for a deeper connection, a broader, more life-altering moment of sympathetic engagement not just with the ancients but also the organic world. For even "science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts," Emerson summarizes (*AS*, 55). "The ambitious soul sits down before each refractory fact; one after another, reduces all strange constitutions, all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on for ever to animate the last fibre of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight" (*AS*, 55).

Creative insight governs Emerson's theory of reading as well. His American scholar must learn to integrate books and authors, making all that is "not-me" part of the reader's own vital and ever-changing self. Emerson's theory of creative reading is a

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following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. All facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form. This is true science" (*Essays and Lectures*, 456).

[41] See McGann.

more radically subjective version of romantic new humanist historicism. It is an extended version of Felton and the Harvard classicists' argument that American students must learn to enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the past, which itself had strong roots in romantic ideology. Nature *and* great books are meant to inspire, in Emerson's portrait: everything outside the self, as he explains in the Greene Street School address, leaves him a different being, a new self, than before. To a "school-boy under the bending dome of day," in these terms, it "is suggested, that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein" (*AS*, 55). Emerson's scholar learns "that nature is the opposite of soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, 'know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'study nature,' become at last one maxim" (*AS*, 56).

So too with great books. If Emerson's scholar learns to identify with the diversity of nature, a true scholar must also learn to perceive the underlying principle — the unity — of what Emerson calls in the second part of his lecture "the mind of the Past" (*AS*, 56). A creative reader must enter into the spirit of ancient and modern authors, "relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein" (*AS*, 55). This is the core of Emerson's theory of human culture, which he articulates perhaps most clearly as a classical college concept in his essay on "History." "A person of child-like genius and in-born energy is still Greek," he writes, "and revives our love of the Muse of Hellas. I admire the love of nature in the Philoctetes. In reading those fine apostrophes to sleep, to the starts, rocks, mountains,

and waves, I feel time passing away as an ebbing sea. I feel the eternity of man, the identity of his thought. The Greek had, it seems, the same fellow-beings as I. The sun and moon, water and fire, met his heart precisely as they meet mine."[42] In his essay on "History," Emerson describes the new humanist concept of "being Greek."[43] "When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me, — when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more. When I feel that we two meet in a perception, that our two souls are tinged with the same hue, and do, as it were, run into one, why should I measure degrees of latitude, why should I could Egyptian years?"[44] Emerson expressed a similar sentiment in the late 1860s, when he advised a young Williams College student to "Avoid all second-hand borrowing books." "No one can select the beautiful passages for you," Emerson exclaims. "It is beautiful to him — well! Another thought, wedding your own aspirations, will be the thing of beauty for you. Do your own quarrying."[45] We see the same idea in the second part of "The American Scholar." "Books are the best of things, well used," Emerson declares (*AS*, 57). When "abused" they are "among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect?" (*AS*, 57).

Emerson's answer is that higher learning must be applied. History — and reading — must be put to use for our own unique purposes, in the context of our own changing times. Emerson wants to consume great books, digest them, and put them to work as sustenance — creative energy that feeds the American scholar's own life and thought.

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[42] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 249.

[43] See Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, chap. 3.

[44] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 249.

[45] Qtd. in Richardson, *First We Read, Then We Write*, 15.

"The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul," he proclaims in the second part of "The American Scholar" address. "This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence, it is progressive" (*AS*, 57).

Emerson speaks with authority as if directly to the new humanist scholars in his Harvard audience. They are not the only ones blessed with the power of creative reading, the quasi-religious capacity for "thoughtful intellectual wandering."[46] "It is remarkable," Emerson muses, "the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They improve us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads" (*AS*, 58). This is the same idea explored in Emerson's essay on "History." Reading is a vehicle for self-improvement: it is a variety of moral and aesthetic enlargement, a process of integration, in which the scholar sees "We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy, — with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all *time* from their verses," Emerson lectures in "The American Scholar." "There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise, when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had wellnigh thought and said" (*AS*, 58). Just as D. A. Wyttenbach travels back in time, as it were, and imagines himself speaking the words of Demosthenes, Emerson imagines himself thinking along with the lines of modern poetry. Emerson describes the intense joy of feeling another

[46] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 19.

author's words leap off the page, as if they were born right out of his own mind. The ideas of great poets and philosophers confirm his innermost thoughts.

Emerson was always surprised and delighted by the power of historical correspondence, his sense that "one nature wrote and the same reads." "It happens to us once or twice in a lifetime, to be drunk with some book which probably has some extraordinary relative power to intoxicate *us* and none other," Emerson writes in a letter to a friend, "and having exhausted that cup of enchantment we go groping in libraries all our years afterwards in the hope of being in Paradise again." The history of human culture spans a vast enough landscape for all inquiring minds to find something of themselves in it. Emerson experienced intoxication by books many times throughout his long life, though he always thirsted for more. "One must be an inventor to read well," he lectures in "The American Scholar." "As the proverb says, 'He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies.'"

> There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. We then see, what is always true, that, as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume. The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakespeare, only that least part, — only the authentic utterances of the oracle; — all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakespeare's. (*AS*, 59)

In this passage, which could almost serve as an epigraph to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, the only two book-length works Thoreau published in his lifetime, Emerson captures the pure "joy" that other transcendentalists, including Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Emerson's own deeply learned aunts, Sarah Ripley and Mary Moody Emerson, experience while reading. Historians of the

transcendentalist movement have not sufficiently traced the new humanist origins of Emerson's theory. In Emerson's account of inspired reading, each line "becomes luminous with manifold allusion" and the words of ancient authors and modern poets become "as broad as the world." Thoreau associated this kind of heightened experience with the physical — and emotional, spiritual — experience of summiting a mountain, as we will see in chapter two. Just as the lines of Demosthenes have a thrilling, almost erotic effect on mind and body of D. A. Wyttenbach, the Concord writers frequently describe the feeling of growing stronger, the experience of standing for a moment outside of themselves, with every repeated reading of world literary, historical, religious, and philosophical texts.

I am not saying that Emerson and the Concord writers simply aped the liberal learning of Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton. Emerson, Thoreau, and the transcendentalists adapted new humanist theory, extending the culture of classicism in the process of establishing their own unique vision. "Emerson did not read in order to pick up the common coin of his culture or class," Robert D. Richardson has argued. "He did not even read with the Arnoldian hope of learning the best that had been thought and said," in Richardson's account. "Emerson read for personal gain, for personal use." He "read almost entirely in order to feed his own writing."[47]

This is why Emerson advised a young Harvard student in late 1860s to do his own quarrying. True genius creates, Emerson claims in "The American Scholar" address. Creative reading — transcendental higher learning — has the power to draw out the heroic poet-scholar in us all. Through creative reading and writing, finally, Emerson's

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[47] Richardson, *First We Read, Then We Write*, 11, 13.

scholar-poet resists the temptation to become a "devoted and selfish worshipper of Mammon," to recall Thoreau's words in his senior-year Harvard address.[48] "Colleges have their indispensable office, — to teach the elements," Emerson agrees in "The American Scholar." "But they can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame" (*AS*, 59). In his vision of creative reading Emerson underscores the educational nature of his antimaterialist sentiment. "Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns, and pecuniary foundations, though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit. Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year" (*AS*, 59).

Emerson's conclusion is clear. "The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars" (*AS*, 54). "The scholar," in sharp contrast, "is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges" (*AS*, 70). Emerson's Harvard Phi Beta Kappa lecture paints a more radically romantic picture of Cornelius Felton's classical scholar, one who "lead[s] onward," in Felton's words, "to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles" (*OCL*, 331). "If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce" his audience's "ear," Emerson concludes, "it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in

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[48] Thoreau, *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, 117-18.

yourself slumbers the whole of Reason: it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the unsearched for might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar" (*AS*, 70).

Emerson reiterates his romantic and new humanist message, finally, in "Literary Ethics." Standing in front of the two most well known literary societies at Dartmouth College, on July 24, 1838, Emerson firmly established his faith in the sanctity of academic and intellectual life. "I have reached the middle age of man," he begins, "yet I believe I am not less glad or sanguine at the meeting of scholars, than when, a boy, I first saw the graduates of my own College assembled at their anniversary. Neither years nor books have yet availed to extirpate a prejudice then rooted in me, that a scholar is the favorite of Heaven and earth, the excellency of his country, the happiest of men. His duties lead him directly into the holy ground where other men's aspirations only point. His successes are occasions of the purest joy to all men" (*LE*, 95).

Emerson paints intellectual life as an antidote to modern materialism in "Literary Ethics." "The growth of the intellect," he lectures, "is strictly analogous in all individuals. It is a larger reception" (*LE*, 100). Dartmouth graduates, however, "will hear every day the maxims of low prudence," Emerson warns. "You will hear, that the first duty is to get land and money, place and name" in the world (*LE*, 111). If Dartmouth graduates choose to lead a life of the mind, as they pass from college to work in the professional world, their neighbors will question them. But if "God have called any of you to explore truth and beauty," Emerson exclaims, "be bold, be firm, be true.

When you shall say, 'As others do, so will I: I renounce, and let learning and romantic expectations go, until a more convenient season;' — then dies the man in you; then once more perish the buds of art, and poetry, and science, as they have died already in a thousand thousand men. The hour of that choice is the crisis of your history; and see that you hold yourself fast by the intellect" (*LE*, 111).

The concluding paragraphs of "Literary Ethics" point forward to Thoreau's own rich and varied life of the mind, as Thoreau portrays it in *A Week* and *Walden*. "Explore and explore," Emerson urges his Dartmouth audience. "Be neither chided nor flattered out of your position of perpetual inquiry. Neither dogmatize, nor accept another's dogmatism. Why should you renounce your right to traverse the star-lit deserts of truth, for the premature comforts of an acre, house, and barn? Truth also has its roof, and bed, and board" (*LE*, 111). This injunction is very close to the path of higher learning that Thoreau followed, when he went to live for two years, two months, and two days in the woods by the shore of Walden Pond. Thoreau imagined himself bringing back the heroic ages, when he paddled the Concord and Merrimack rivers with his brother, John, in 1839 as well. In the following two chapters, we will see how Thoreau's interest in travel narrative itself can perhaps best be understood in terms of Harvard new humanist theory. Thoreau's concept of "literary excursion" can best be described in terms of the classical college and Emersonian idea that reading is a form of imaginative travel, a variety of thoughtful intellectual wandering that has the power to challenge some of the most dominant assumptions of antebellum American society. *A Week* and *Walden* are literary and intellectual excursions that cover an astonishing range of world cultural and historical ground. Both books map the movement of broad-gauged, widely diffused learning.

Emerson's early education lectures anticipate the style of "higher" learning that Thoreau adopted, and adapted, namely, the "position of perpetual inquiry" and habit of "larger reception" that took on, toward the end of Thoreau's life, a more distinctly political edge. By 1859, as we will see in chapter four, Thoreau portrayed Captain John Brown himself as a model American scholar.

For now, suffice it to say that Emerson's education lectures in the 1837 and 1838 reflect a habit of mind that he still valued in 1867. In his obituary for his aunt, Emerson paints Sarah Ripley as a classical scholar in her own right. "There is a relation between the hours of life and the centuries of time," Emerson continues in his essay on "History." "As the air I breathe is drawn from the great repositories of nature, as the light on my book is yielded by a star a hundred millions of miles distant, as the poise of my body depends on the equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, so the hours should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours."[49] Emerson says his audience must enter into the spirit of the past. "The student is to read history actively and not passively; to esteem his own life the text, and books the commentary." It is not hard to hear Emerson building on the teaching of Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton:

> We as we read must become Greeks and Romans, Turks, priest and king, martyr and executioner, must fasten these images to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall see nothing, learn nothing, keep nothing. What befell Asdrubal or Caesar Borgia, is as much an illustration of the mind's powers and depravations as what has befallen us. Each new law and political movement has meaning for you. Stand before each of its tablets and say, 'Here is one of my coverings. Under this fantastic, or odious, or graceful mask, did my Proteus nature hide itself.' This remedies the defect of our too great nearness to ourselves. This throws our own actions into perspective; and as crabs, goats, scorpions, the balance of the waterpot, lose all their meanness when hung as signs in the zodiac, so I can see my own vices without heat in the distant persons of

[49] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures,* 237.

Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline.[50]

Reading "remedies the defect of our own too great nearness to ourselves," in Emerson's portrait. It "throws our own actions into perspective." I have found no evidence of Cornelius Felton's response to Emerson's address on "The American Scholar" in 1837. Felton would not have traveled to hear Emerson's Greene Street School address in Providence, because the school itself, which planned to conduct its lessons in the manner of Bronson Alcott, was certainly too progressive for Felton. Professor Felton probably would not have traveled to Dartmouth to hear "Literary Ethics" either. "The American Scholar" and "Literary Ethics" both appeared as separate pamphlets in the year they were delivered, so it is likely that Felton would have heard about — or read them. There is also a chance, at any rate, that Felton recognized some of his own ideas in Emerson's essay on "History."

Felton reviewed Emerson's first series of *Essays*, which featured "History," for the *Christian Examiner* in 1841. Felton's review is mostly negative. "To a very great extent," Felton complains, "the new opinions" expressed in Emerson's *Essays* "are ancient errors and sophistries, mistaken for new truths." Indeed, Mr. Emerson's whimsical associations often lead him out of the regions of thought, into the realm of vague, shadow impressions."[51] At the same time, Felton's review concludes with long quotations from Emerson's essay on "History," including the passage cited above, in which Emerson claims we must all become Greeks and Romans. How is Emerson's statement so different from Felton's argument in "On Classical Learning" that we "must

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[50] Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 239, 238.

[51] Felton, *Christian Examiner and General Review* 30.2 (May 1841), 253, 258.

enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics" (*OCL*, 331)? Is Emerson's vision really all that more "whimsical" that Felton's claim, in 1830, that "every power is called upon — every moral feeling is confirmed — every honorable aspiration may be gratified" in the pursuit of classical education (*OCL*, 331)? Felton quotes large portions of Emerson's essay on history without comment, leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Perhaps Felton partially agreed with — or at least recognized — some of Emerson's romantic and new humanist musings.

Chapter Two

Reading as Imaginative Travel in *A Week*

In October 1849, four months after the publication of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Professor Cornelius Felton published a review of *The Prometheus and Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, translated into English by Henry William Herbert.[1] About half-way through the article, Felton mentions his former student, Henry Thoreau, who completed his own translation of the *Prometheus Bound* six years earlier.[2] "There has been one translation of the Prometheus Fettered published in this country before Mr. Herbert's," Felton writes. "It was written for that whimsical and short-lived monthly — the Dial — by Mr. Henry Thoreau, a scholar of talent, but of such pertinacious oddity in literary matters, that his writings will never probably do him any justice." Thoreau's "translation was executed with ability," Felton claims, "but not being in the poetical form, is scarcely subject to criticism as a work of art, and cannot be brought into any fair comparison with Mr. Herbert's."[3]

Felton gets several details wrong. The *Dial* was in fact a quarterly publication, not a monthly — and Thoreau composed his translation of *Prometheus Bound* in free

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[1] Cornelius Conway Felton, review of *The Prometheus and Agamemnon of Aeschylus, translated into English Verse by Henry William Herbert*, *The North American Review* 69, no. 145 (October 1849), 407-421. Quoted in Walter Harding, "Thoreau's Professor Has His Say," *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 46 (Winter 1954), 3.

[2] For Thoreau's translation, first published in the January 1843 issue of the *Dial*, see *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Translations*, ed. Kevin P. Van Anglen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

[3] Felton, review of *The Prometheus and Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, 414.

verse.[4] As for Felton's appraisal of his former student's "pertinacious oddity in literary matters," it is worth noting that the professor's opinion was the common one in 1849. Since the appearance of Thoreau's first book, many readers have viewed *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* as a literary oddity. Many agree with the assessment of James Russell Lowell, who took issue with the style of *A Week* in an early review. Thoreau's abundant "digressions" hamper the flow of his river book.[5] "We come upon them like snags, jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up stream or drifting down," Lowell complains. "Mr. Thoreau becomes so absorbed in these discussions, that he seems, as it were, to *catch a crab*, and disappears uncomfortably from his seat at the bow-oar. We could forgive them all, especially . . . [Thoreau's digression] on Books, and that on Friendship . . . we could welcome them all, were they put by themselves at the end of the book. But as it is, they are out of proportion and out of place, and mar out Merrimacking dreadfully."

"We are bid to a river party," in other words, "not to be preached at." Thoreau's digressions "thrust themselves obtrusively out of the narrative," making it impossible to follow the narrative of *A Week* in any sort of straight-forward, linear or logical way.[6] Long since Lowell's initial assessment, scholars have long since struggled to define — let alone admire — the style and genre of Thoreau's first book. At best, A *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* has been considered "Thoreau's most 'transcendental'

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[4] Harding, "Thoreau's Professor Has His Say," 3.

[5] James Russell Lowell, review of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Massachusetts Quarterly Review* 3 (December 1849): 47.

[6] Lowell, 47.

work," even "the most ambitious book which the [transcendentalist] movement produced."[7] At worst, *A Week* has been viewed as a collection of Thoreau's miscellaneous writing, patched together loosely, with no real organizing thread.[8]

The following chapter argues that Thoreau's first book is about reading. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* may be a literary oddity. It may be marred, and the book certainly sold poorly.[9] But *A Week* at the same time comes straight out of Cornelius Felton's Harvard new humanist and classical college mind. *A Week* is he work of an American scholar — "a scholar of talent" at that, in the words of Professor Felton.[10] Thoreau's first book can be viewed as a display of "thoughtful intellectual wandering," a

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[7] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 207. Buell's account of *A Week* remains the best assessment of the ranging digressive style of the book. See especially 188-238. Two more recent accounts that I have found helpful are Meredith L. McGill, "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" in *American Literary History* 19, no. 2 (January 2007): 357-374 and H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* the Journal, *and Walden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Buell, McGill, Peck, and others focus on aspects of Thoreau's approach to time and the past in *A Week*, though not from the perspective of Harvard new humanist philology and the concept of sympathetic historical imagination. See also Linck C. Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40-56 and T*horeau's Complex Weave: The Writing of "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," With the Text of the First Draft* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986).

[8] For a detailed discussion of the reception and later reputation of *A Week*, see Linck C. Johnson, "Historical Introduction," in *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[9] In 1853, Thoreau took back 706 of the 1,000 copies of *A Week*, which were printed in 1849. "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes," he proclaimed, "over seven hundred of which I wrote myself." See Johnson, "Historical Introduction."

[10] Felton, review of *The Prometheus and Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, 41.

travel narrative that maps the movement of "broad-gauged, widely diffuse learning."[11] Thoreau's digressions, the book's astonishing habit of becoming "absorbed," completely wrapped up in its own wide-ranging thought and "discussions," serves as a primary organizing principle of the text.[12] In many ways the practice of broad-gauged, sympathetic reading holds the days of *A Week* together. Thoreau portrays the process of reading ancient classics as a form of imaginative travel, "a high and by way serene to travel" (*A Week*, 183). Reading emerges as an intellectual adventure, a creative pursuit that has the power to challenge the ruling spirit of antebellum industry and commerce. This dynamic emerges most clearly in the "Tuesday" chapter of *A Week*. Thoreau's account of creative reading in the "Tuesday" chapter can help us better understand the digressive nature of his first book as a whole.

Professor Felton must not have noticed traces of his own classical college teaching and learning in the pages of Thoreau's travel narrative.[13] Thoreau's style of

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[11] Caroline Winterer, *The Classics and Culture*, 18-19 and 1-31 passim. Also Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, especially 44-98. See my discussion of Harvard classicism in my introduction and chapter one.

[12] Lowell, 47.

[13] "After all I believe it is the style of thought entirely and not the style of expression which makes the difference in books," Thoreau confides in his journal on March 23, 1842 (*PJ1*, 387). In *A Week*, Thoreau's style of writing *is* a style of thought, a mode of reading that he learned while he was at Harvard. I have found no direct evidence that Professor Felton read Thoreau's first book, though it is hard not to interpret Felton's appraisal of Thoreau as an American scholar "of pertinacious oddity in literary matters" outside the context of the publication of *A Week* in 1849. See Felton, review of *The Prometheus and Agamemnon of Aeschylus*, 414. As mentioned above, Felton's review of Henry William Herbert's work appeared in *The North American Review* four months after the publication of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

writing in *A Week* adapts and extends new humanist modes of active reading: in this sense Thoreau's first book is about the value of wide-ranging thought and sympathetic, creative reading. Perhaps Thoreau pushes the concept too far, beyond the recognition of his Harvard Professors. Or perhaps Cornelius Felton failed to read *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* slowly, and carefully, enough. *A Week* places special demands on the reader, as we will see in a moment. By the time Thoreau entered Harvard College in the fall of 1833, at any rate, Cambridge was in the throes of a revolution in classical scholarship. Cornelius Felton led the charge. During his time as an undergraduate, Thoreau took a total of five courses with Professor Felton. Thoreau took an additional eight courses in Latin language and literature with Felton's colleague, the German emigre and new humanist scholar Charles Beck.[14] Just two years before Thoreau entered college, Felton and Beck launched what Caroline Winterer has called "the first postcollegiate training program in classical study in America. Their Philological Seminary," according to Winterer, "aimed to teach the classics to college graduates, either for the pleasure of the student or for future classical language teachers."[15]

The "curriculum" of Felton and Beck's Philological Seminary "included lectures and the reading of whole works, innovations that Felton used in his undergraduate classrooms shortly after that."[16] Felton taught his students to read widely and deeply,

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[14] Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Thoreau's Harvard Years: Materials Introductory to New Explorations, Record of Fact, and Background* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1966).

[15] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 84. Felton's classical "seminary had failed by the end of the 1832-33 academic year, perhaps the victim of financial difficulties" (84).

[16] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 84.

with broad-gauged sympathetic imagination, so that his students learned to grasp "the situation of the author," that is, "the connexion of the passage in question with the context . . . [and] the style of ancient thought (*OCL*, 314).[17] This mode of reading, Felton's own style of "enter[ing] more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics," helps guide the flow of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (*OCL*, 330).

Thoreau's "Tuesday" chapter develops the theme of creative reading from the start. The chapter begins with an important digression that recalls Thoreau's prior ascent of Saddleback Mountain, now called Mount Greylock in Massachusetts.[18] The Thoreau brothers "pushed in to the fog" one early morning in September, only to reach "a narrow and shallow wreath of vapor stretched over the channel of the Merrimack from the seaboard to the mountains" (*A Week*, 146-7). At this point in Thoreau's narrative, the two brothers are well on their way to Mount Washington in New Hampshire, the destination for their trip.[19] "More extensive fogs, however, have their own limits," Thoreau writes. "I once saw the day break from the top of Saddle-back Mountain in

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[17] Qtd. in Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 78.

[18] Thoreau climbed Saddleback Mountain in 1844. For a short account of this excursion, see Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 171-72.

[19] The Thoreau brothers commenced their journey from Concord, Massachusetts to Mount Washington, in the white mountains of New Hampshire, in the late summer of 1839. They traveled up the Concord River, to the Merrimack, and north on the Merrimack River to Concord, New Hampshire The Thoreau brothers continued on foot to the summit of Mount Washington, and returned the same way they came. See the frontispiece, "Thoreau's Map of His Journey," in *The Illustrated A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, With Photographs from the Gleason Collection (1984; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Massachusetts, above the clouds. As we cannot distinguish objects through this dense fog, let me tell this story more at length" (*A Week*, 147).

Thoreau's Saddleback Mountain digression has often been called the spiritual high point of his first book.[20] The digression tells the tale of his ascent of Saddleback, as a way of anticipating Thoreau's account of climbing Mount Washington with his brother, an event that takes place in the "Thursday" chapter of *A Week*.[21] Thoreau weaves several other accounts of prior excursions into the narrative of *A Week*, but the Saddleback digression stands out as his most substantial remembrance of a prior trip.[22] Thoreau's Saddleback digression also stands out because it depicts a scene of mountain-top reading, so to speak, a moment of inspiration — a rise to authority and imaginative renaissance — that is achieved in large part through the power of creative reading. Scenes of sacred and

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[20] Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 220-221 and 221 note 6. Thoreau's experience on Saddleback Mountain, writes Linck C. Johnson, "suggests a renaissance of imaginative power" (*Thoreau's Complex Weave*, 30).

[21] Thoreau's account of summiting Mount Washington is famously brief. Thoreau is interested in the journey, not the destination, as Linck C. Johnson notes ("A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, 42). "But we will not leap at once to our journey's end, though near, but imitate Homer, who conducts his reader over the plain, and along the resounding sea, though it be but to the tent of Achilles," Thoreau writes in "A Walk to Wachusett," an essay he published in 1843. "In the spaces of thought are the reaches of land and water, where men go and come. The landscape lies far and fair within, and the deepest thinker is the farthest traveled." Qtd. in Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 42. In "A Walk to Wachusett," Thoreau and his travel companion, Richard Fuller, read Virgil as they lounge out-of-doors along their journey. The essay anticipates Thoreau's account of reading the ancient classics along the river in *A Week*.

[22] "The river voyage described in *A Week* is consequently punctuated by a series of ascents, preliminary pilgrimages to mountain tops that prepare for the ultimate climb to 'the summit of Agiocook' — significantly, Thoreau adopted the Indian name for Mt. Washington — the highest peak in New England," writes Linck C. Johnson ("A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 46).

inspired reading, moments of heightened reflection and observation that take place out-of-doors, in fact pepper the pages of Thoreau's first book. These moments take place along the river, in the "dense fog" or on a mountain top, always in the vast space and open air of the natural environment (*A Week*, 147). Nature invests Thoreau's reading with a sense of grandeur, a feeling of openness and receptivity that inspires him to *think along with* rather than merely about past texts, ideas, and events. Thoreau's Saddleback Mountain digression, in the opening pages of the "Tuesday" chapter, in this way looks forward to his account of reading the ancient classics — "the higher regions of literature" — at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter (*A Week*, 183). From beginning to end, "Tuesday" develops the theme of reading as imaginative travel.

Thoreau's Saddleback digression warns us "not" to get "lost," in other words: we must give ourselves up to the pure joy of "pathless" mental journeying (*A Week*, 150).[23] Thoreau hints that reading is like "travelling in the forest, especially among mountains" (*A Week*, 150). Such pathless mental journeying emerges as "an intoxication of delight," much like Elizabeth Peabody's "Vision" of creative reading in 1843.[24] A truly

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[23] For a perceptive reading of the theme of "pathless" journeying in *A Week*, and the theme's connection to Walden, see Linck C. Johnson, *Thoreau's Complex Weave*. Thoreau's experience on Saddleback Mountain, Johnson writes, "suggests a renaissance of imaginative power" (30).

[24] Elizabeth Peabody, "A Vision," 13. Peabody portrays reading as a "mysterious death in life," a quasi-religious experience in which the self becomes lost (13). Peabody's account bears striking resemblance to the more contemporary theory of Susan Sontag. In a short essay on "Writing as Reading" [*Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001)], Sontag writes that "Losing yourself in a book, the old phrase, is not an idle fantasy but an addictive, model reality" (266). "Virginia Woolf famously said, in a letter, 'Sometimes I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading,'" Sontag continues (266). "Surely the heavenly part is that — again, Woolf's words — 'the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the ego.' Unfortunately, we never do lose the ego, any more than we can step over our own

sympathetic reader — a heroic American scholar — must become fully immersed in the vast landscape of history, poetry, mythology, and art.[25] Thoreau implies a connection between the activity of travel, the physical movement of a journey, and the experience of wide and eager reading throughout *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Travel in the "forest" mirrors our movement through the leaves of Thoreau's own fabulously tangled, wonderfully elusive text:

> Even country people, I have observed, magnify the difficulty of travelling in the forest, and especially among mountains. They seem to lack their usual common sense in this. I have climbed several higher mountains without guide or path, and have found, as might be expected, that it takes only more time and patience commonly than to travel the smoothest highway. It is very rare that you meet with obstacles in this world which the humblest man has not faculties to surmount. It is true we may come to a perpendicular precipice, but we need not jump off nor run our heads against it. A man may jump down his own cellar stairs or dash his brains out against his chimney, if he is mad. So far as my experience goes, travellers generally exaggerate the difficulties of the way. Like most evil, the difficulty is imaginary; for what's the hurry? If a person lost would conclude that after all he is not lost, he is not beside himself, but standing in his own old shoes on the very spot where he is, and that for the time being he will live there; but the places that have known him, they are lost, — how much anxiety and danger would vanish. I am not alone if I stand by myself. Who knows where in space this globe is rolling? Yet we will not give ourselves up for lost, let it go where it will (*A Week*, 150).

This passage offers thinly veiled advice about reading. It looks forward to Thoreau's description of mountain-top reading, high on the peak of Saddleback in Massachusetts, which in turn anticipates Thoreau's account of reading the ancient classics at the end of

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feet. But that disembodied rapture, reading, is trance-like enough to make us *feel* egoless" (266). "Like reading," that is, "rapturous reading," Sontag concludes, "writing fiction — inhabiting other selves — feels like losing yourself, too" (266). Sontag's account, drawing on Woolf, bears striking resemblance to Thoreau's depiction of mountain-top reading and Peabody's portrayal of losing herself in books.

[25] Peabody, 13.

the "Tuesday" chapter. Thoreau's description of traveling in the forest gives advice, on the one hand, about how best to read his travel narrative.[26] At the same time Thoreau models how best to approach — and learn from — all books.[27] We enter into the spirit of authors. We must lose ourselves, if only for a moment, in the experience of great books. In this same sense Thoreau and his brother must not think of themselves as common, everyday "country" travelers. And we must have a little self-reliance, a certain willingness to venture out, and experience the digressive nature of Thoreau's travel narrative as well. We are on a sacred journey with the Thoreau brothers. We have embarked on a creative and intellectual adventure, a quest of our own. To find our own way only "takes more time," Thoreau writes. It takes more "patience" — more energy and exertion — "than to travel the smoothest highway" instead.

Thoreau urges us to take up the challenge of reading. We must climb several higher mountains, without guide or path, along with him. Thoreau's own text after all is not "the smoothest highway." It takes a certain amount of flexibility — intellectual and imaginative "exercise" — to travel along, and follow the flow of *A Week on the Concord*

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[26] As mentioned in my introduction, Wesley T. Mott argues that Walden "is in large part about how to read and learn" ("Education," 161). "The opening 'Economy' chapter extends Emerson's critique in 'The American Scholar' of the fragmenting, deadening effect of rote education, in which the intellect is fenced off from the living" (165). Although Mott's essay does not discuss *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau's book can also be viewed as an extended "meditation . . . on active reading, writing, learning" (165).

[27] Thoreau also gives us advice about how to read his own book in the "Reading" chapter of *Walden*. See Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (1972; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially 1-69.

and Merrimack Rivers.[28] We must learn to read slowly, as Friedrich Nietzsche would have it, and "with mental doors ajar."[29] Thoreau's travel narrative is a winding, convoluted text: this is part of what makes the book a thrill to read. Thoreau recognizes that his audience will "generally exaggerate the difficulties of the way." *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is not a book about movement in any one direction. *A Week* has little to do with the formulation of straight-forward, "consequitive" thinking and the production of logical ends.[30] Thoreau's travel narrative simulates the movement of "broad-gauged, widely diffuse learning" and the wonder — the thrill and curiosity —

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[28] Reading "requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention of the whole life to this object," Thoreau writes in *Walden* (403). See my discussion in chapter three.

[29] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Author's Preface," in *The Dawn of Day*, Dover ed., transl. J. M. Kennedy (1911; Mineola, NY, 2007), 9. *The Dawn of Day* was first published in 1881. Nietzsche included a new preface in 1886. Writing near Genoa, he describes his philosophy of "slow reading" in a passage that could almost have been Thoreau's: "we are friends of the *lento*, I and my book," Nietzsche writes. "I have not been a philologist in vain—perhaps I am one yet: a teacher of slow reading. I even come to write slowly. At present it is not only my habit, but even my taste—a perverted taste, maybe—to write nothing but what will drive to despair every one who is "in a hurry." For philology is that venerable art which exacts from its followers one thing above all—to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow—the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, and attains nothing if not *lento*. Thus philology is now more desirable than ever before; thus it is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of "work": that is, of haste, of unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry, which is eager to "get things done" at once, even every book, whether old or new. Philology itself, perhaps, will not so hurriedly "get things done." It teaches how to read well, that is, slowly, profoundly, attentively, prudently, with inner thoughts, with the mental doors ajar, with delicate fingers and eyes. My patient friends, this book appeals only to perfect readers and philologists: learn to read me well! (8-9).

[30] See chapter one for my discussion of Keats's concept of "consequitive man," in relation to the transcendentalists' concept of creative reading. "Consequitive reasoning is for Keats an artificial process," according to Walter Jackson Bate: "it is at home only in the mathematical, measurable world of its own construction" [*Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 13].

of intellectual pursuit in many different directions. *A Week* follows many different angles of inquiry, in other words, exploring multiple "threads" of discussion and interpretation all at one time. Much of Thoreau's first book draws on his wide and eager reading. The narrative builds up around discreet "discussions" about books, society, and culture. The Thoreau brothers come together in conversation, as they travel along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Much like the thoughts of the Thoreau brothers, our own mind — the thought of Thoreau's reader — must become fully "absorbed."[31] Like the mind of Mrs. Ripley, our reading of Thoreau's first book must be "purely receptive."[32]

The style of thought and writing in Thoreau's first book encourages us to remain open to an amplitude of ideas and a wide range of associations. Reading *A Week* is like mountaineering. It is a kind of *reaching out* — an endless search for higher summits and more panoramic, all-encompassing views. As Lawrence Buell recognizes, A Week "is a very hard book to hold in one's mind."[33] This experience of difficulty and elusiveness mirrors the process of creative, mountain-top reading. Higher learning is a lifelong pursuit, a search for more satisfying peaks, higher mountains of thought and interpretive experience. The reader of *A Week* must reach out and "voyage" too. "I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of progress," as Thoreau writes in the opening pages of *A Week* (13). All things "that floated past, fulfilling their fate," he continues, "were objects of singular interest to me, and at last I

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[31] Lowell, 47.

[32] See my discussion of Emerson's obituary for his aunt, Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, in chapter one. "The most intellectual gladly conversed" with Mrs Ripley, "whose knowledge," Emerson writes, "however rich and varied, was always with her only the means of new acquisition" (Qtd. in Goodwin, 2).

[33] Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, 206.

resolved to launch myself on its bosom and float wither it would bear me" (*A Week*, 9). Thoreau's point is not that the voyage lacks difficulties. The landscape will be beautiful, packed with "objects of singular interest." At times reading — wide and eager imaginative travel — feels dangerous. At times we feel egoless and completely lost. Indeed "we may come to a perpendicular precipice," Thoreau writes in his Saddleback Mountain digression, "but we need not jump off nor dash our heads against it" (*A Week*, 150). People "magnify the difficulty of travelling in the forest," in other words (*A Week*, 150). Yet there are ultimately no "objects in this world which the humblest man has not faculties to surmount" (*A Week*, 150).

This includes the terrain — the textual "object" — of Thoreau's travel narrative. We must read slowly, pursuing our own path and keeping our wits about us. Thoreau's style of writing becomes a way for him to explore — consume and digest — the vast mountain of his own reading. In this sense *A Week* serves not just as a literary excursion through the sublime New England countryside, but as an imaginative journey through the winding landscape of an American scholar's mind. Our job is to keep up — and rise to the occasion. We must climb the mountain and keep up with the twists and turns of Thoreau's river-like text. We find ourselves in the wilderness along with the Thoreau brothers. We must throw ourselves headlong into the journey. The challenge is not to let the book's digressions jolt us clear out of our interpretive boat.

The extended theme of "writing as reading," that is, the idea of writing as a mode of interpretation, a kind of conversation, a quest or constant questioning of the world,

begins to bring the narrative flow of Thoreau's first book together.[34] A Week is more like a web, full of interconnected thoughts and associations: it is a volume of meditations, essayistic wanderings, wonderings even, all woven together in an ecology of aqueous text. In this light the book should be approached "without guides or paths," just as a country traveler should not worry so much about getting lost in the forest. Getting lost is part of the process. It allows us to find our own way. The Thoreau brothers "launch" themselves into the currents of their own flowing thought, after all, "and float wither it would bear" (*A Week*, 13). Their ramblings at times take on a "planetary" scale.[35]

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[34] See Sontag's essay on "Writing as Reading," and her concept of "rapturous reading," cited above. The Thoreau brothers are both readers *and* writers, as portrayed in *A Week*. In the "Thursday" chapter, for example, the two brothers end their day by writing in their journal: " we went to bed that summer evening," Thoreau writes, "on a sloping shelf in the bank, a couple of rods from our boat, which was drawn up on the sand, and just behind a thin fringe of oaks which bordered the river; without having disturbed any inhabitants but the spiders in the grass, which came out by the light of our lamp, and crawled over our buffaloes. When we looked out from under the tent, the trees were seen dimly through the mist, and a cool dew hung upon the grass, which seemed to rejoice in the night, and with the damp air we inhaled a solid fragrance. Having eaten our supper of hot cocoa and bread and watermelon, we soon grew weary of conversing, and writing in our journals, and, putting out the lantern which hung from the tent-pole, fell asleep" (*A Week*, 270). Thoreau concludes this striking passage with a recognition of the lost "experiences" that writing "cannot quite reach": "Unfortunately, many things have been omitted which should have been recorded in our journal; for though we made it a rule to set down all our experiences therein, yet such a resolution is very hard to keep, for the important experience rarely allows us to remember such obligations, and so indifferent things get recorded, while that is frequently neglected. It is not easy to write in a journal what interests us at any time, because to write it is not what interests us" (*A Week*, 270).

[35] In *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Wai Chee Dimock argues that American literature "is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever-multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages, and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment — connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they threat American texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. This double threading thickens time, lengthens it, shadowing in its midst the abiding traces of the planet's multitudinous life." Dimock's account of the

Thoughtful intellectual wandering, like summiting a mountain, becomes not so troubling if we give ourselves up entirely to the process. We must become fully immersed in the spirit of the text. It takes "more time and patience," Thoreau admits, but "what's the hurry?" (*A Week*, 150). "Who knows where in space" — where in time, where in thought — Thoreau's travel narrative "is rolling" (*A Week*, 150)? Like the whirling "globe," or the changing days of a week, like the shifting seasons, or the swift flow of creative thought, Thoreau's narrative constantly changes directions (*A Week*, 150). As active readers, we must not "give ourselves up for lost" but "let" the text "go where it will" (*A Week*, 150).

Thoreau's description of "travelling in the forest, and especially among mountains," prepares the way for his account of inspired reading near the top of Saddleback Mountain. The process of coming to terms with a text can be confusing. It can make us "mad," as if we were somehow "beside" our "self" (*A Week*, 150). But the experience of interpretation is full of excitement. Like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Thoreau's travel narrative "inspires us with a sense of wonder, a desire for knowledge," because the experience of reading both books can feel so "obscure and difficult."[36] We must hold out

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"planetary" scale of American literature captures the astonishing breadth of inquiry that defines the texture and movement of Thoreau's travel narrative.

[36] Leslie Eckel, "Reading with Wonder, *Common-Place* 10, no. 2 (January 2010)," http://www.common-place.org/vol-10/no-02/reading/. Melville's novel, according to Eckel, "inspires in us a felling of wonder, a desire for knowledge," for the process of interpretation itself can be so "obscure and difficult." Reading "requires 'diligent study' and intellectual exertion," for the world's most challenging works "cannot be understood on the first try." The very idea of interpretability (the play and variety, the multiplicity of meaning) "inspires in us" that "feeling of wonder," an insatiable yearning or desire "to 'find out' more, simply because the meaning that this book promises is so sublime. Although that meaning may be only 'half-attained,' or even 'unimaginable,' it hovers right on what Philip Fisher calls 'the horizon line of what is potentially knowable, but not

for those mountain-top moments, in which we suddenly experience, through "diligent study" and "intellectual exertion," a feeling of insight and understanding.[37] We must have hope when wandering the thickest parts of Thoreau's narrative forest. "If a person lost would conclude that after all he is not lost, he is not beside himself, but standing in his own old shoes on the very spot where he is, and for the time being he will live there," Thoreau concludes, "but the places that have known him, they are lost, — how much anxiety and danger would vanish" (*A Week*, 150). The process of reading can be full of doubt and anxiety, but we must stand on our own two feet. There is something exhilarating about the Thoreau brothers' loss of familiar surroundings in *A Week*. The narrative pattern mirrors the movement of "alienation and return," "in which the mind

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yet known': that territory we want desperately to inhabit but know we cannot quite reach." In Eckel's account, the experience of reading Moby-Dick is speculative. "Frustrating, teasing, and egging us on, as we swear to ourselves that we will master, or at the very least, finish this book are all part of Melville's larger plan," Eckel summarizes. The parallel to Thoreau's travel narrative is apt. See also Gregg Crane's description of the speculative or philosophical novel (especially his discussion of *Moby-Dick*) in his *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[37] Eckel, "Reading with Wonder." In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Eckel explains, Melville writes of " 'that undeveloped, (and sometimes undevelopable) yet dimly-discernable greatness' of a working imagination. This imagination captures 'occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth' that, however fleeting, keep spectators and readers alike hooked as they balance on the edge between the known and the unknown. For Melville, a writer's power to suggest an elusive 'Truth,' whatever that may be, is far more important than his capacity to explain what that meaning really is. As readers of *Moby-Dick*, a book of distinctly Shakespearean ambition, we are perplexed by the holes that riddle the narrative even as we endeavor to see through them to the ultimate truth we have been promised." For the full text of "Hawthorne and His Mosses," see Herman Melville, *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Billy Budd, Uncollected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1984).

continually stretches beyond its ordinary point of view."[38] An imaginative reader becomes "sufficiently alien" and returns home "enlarged and transformed".[39] Education expands the boundaries of self, Thoreau believed: "I am not alone if I stand by myself" (*A Week*, 150).

A driving force behind Thoreau's experience of insight on top of Saddleback Mountain is this very experience of creative integration. High above near the peak of Saddleback, reading takes on a life of its own, and Thoreau comes to a higher understanding of the world around him. In such a mountain-top moment, creative reading renders even the "business part of a paper" transformed:

> I sat up during the evening, reading by the light of the fire the scraps of newspapers in which some party had wrapped their luncheon; the prices current in New York and Boston, the advertisements, and the singular editorials which some had seen fit to publish, not forseeing under what critical circumstances they would be read. I read these things at a vast advantage there, and it seemed to me that the advertisements, or what is called the business part of a paper, were greatly the best, the most useful, natural, and respectable. Almost all the opinions and sentiments expressed were so little considered, so shallow and flimsy, that I thought the very texture of the paper must be weaker in that part and tear more easily. The advertisements and the prices current were more closely allied to nature,

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[38] James A. Good and Jim Garrison, "Traces of Hegelian Bildung in Dewey's Philosophy," in *Dewey and Continental Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 51. As I discuss in chapter one, Good and Garrison provide a strong summary of the German neo-humanist approach to education that underlies transcendental higher learning. Good and Garrison trace German new humanism to its roots Hegelian roots, though they do not discuss the transcendentalists. "Education is a dialectical process of alienation and return, according to Hegel, in which the mind continually stretches beyond its ordinary point of view" (51). Hegel "sought to accomplish this by alienating the child's mind from its received point of view through the study of the ancient world and its languages. Ancient civilizations are sufficiently alien, he claimed, to separate children from their natural state but sufficiently close to their own language and world for them to return to themselves enlarged and transformed. The goal of education was to help students realize the ideal of modernity, which is for the individual to become a self-directed, self-formed person" (51-52).

[39] Good and Garrison, 52.

> and were respectable in some measure as tide and meteorological tables are; but the reading-matter, which I remembered was most prized down below, unless it was some humble record of science, or an extract from some old classic, struck me as strangely whimsical, and crude, and one-idea'd, like a school-boy's theme, such as youths write and after burn. The opinions were of that kind that are doomed to wear a different aspect to-morrow, like last year's fashions; as if mankind were very green indeed, and would be ashamed of themselves in a few years, when they had outgrown this verdant period. There was, moreover, a singular disposition to wit and humor, but rarely the slightest real success; and the apparent success was a terrible satire on the attempt; the Evil Genius of man laughed the loudest at his best jokes. The advertisements, as I have said, such as were serious, and not of the modern quack kind, suggested pleasing and poetic thoughts; for commerce is really as interesting as nature. The very names of the commodities were poetic, and as suggestive as if they had been inserted in a pleasing poem, – Lumber, Cotton, Sugar, Hides, Guano, Logwood. Some sober, private, and original thought would have been grateful to read there, and as much in harmony with the circumstances as if it had been written on a mountain-top; for it is of a fashion which never changes, and as respectable as hides and logwood, or any natural product. What an inestimable companion such a scrap of paper would have been, containing some fruit of a mature life. What a relic! What a recipe! It seemed a divine intervention, by which not mere shining coin, but shining and current thoughts, could be brought up and left there. (*A Week*, 150-51)

Thoreau is not reading the ancient classics in this passage, but the moment anticipates his exalted view from "the higher regions of literature" at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter (*A Week*, 183). Thoreau's account of mountain-top reading employs religious language — "such a scrap of paper," "What a relic!" — and reaches great heights of speculation, as if to mirror the "occasional flashings-forth," the same "feeling of wonder and desire for knowledge," that Melville describes in "Hawthorne and His Mosses."[40] Thoreau's portrait of mountain-top reading, near the summit of Saddleback, seems a moment of "divine intervention," in which the Concord writer experiences heightened consciousness. Thoreau feels "an intoxication of delight," a sense of expansive,

[40] Eckel, "Reading as Wonder."

"pleasing and poetic thoughts," an account that sounds like Elizabeth Peabody in "A Vision."[41] Or in Emerson's words, Thoreau's act of reading on top of Saddleback Mountain seems almost to reach out and "touch the bright thunder bolts of truth which it is given the true scholar to launch & whose light flashes through ages without diminution."[42]

What we have is an example of reading "in a high sense."[43] Thoreau's reading of "newspapers" on top of Saddleback Mountain is just one example of the many scenes of inspired reading that pepper the pages of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Such moments are "closely allied with nature" (*A Week*, 150). If "the ways in which we read are indications of our habits of attention in every sphere of human practice," then Thoreau portrays himself at the height of his own interpretive powers on top of Saddleback Mountain.[44] When studied "at such an advantage," high "on a mountain-

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[41] Peabody, "A Vision," 13.

[42] Qtd. in Sealts, *Emerson on the Scholar*, 58.

[43] Timothy Gould, "Henry David Thoreau," rev. ed., in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed., E. Craig, accessed June 2, 2012, http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/DC081. According to Gould, "Thoreau does not distinguish greatly between Eastern and Western traditions; rather he is concerned to distinguish between 'easy reading' and what he calls the 'heroic books.'" "What Thoreau characterizes as 'heroic' is connected to what he sees as the need for an epistemology of human possibility. He offers us an investigation of the relation between the literary depiction of mental liberation and the natural conditions of practical freedom. The ways in which we read, as much as the newspapers and novels that constitute the bulk of our reading, are indications of our habits of attention in every sphere of human practice. Thoreau finds the dominant characteristic of these various enterprises to be a self-dissipation that undermines our ability to concentrate our powers. Reading in a 'high sense' is a primary path on which we may recover our concentration and discernment. Reading thus becomes a way to discover the conditions under which we work and act."

[44] Gould, "Henry David Thoreau," see note above.

top," even modern "advertisements" become transformed. Thoreau's act of reading is a variety of religious experience. Signs of industry and commerce suddenly become beautiful on top of the mountain: even "commerce," Thoreau recognizes, "is really as interesting as nature."[45] Thoreau elevates "the business part of a paper" as if by an act of "willful vitality," an act of deep "concentration and discernment."[46] Thoreau seems almost to be describing "an extract from some old classic," yet he studies only "scraps" of news on top of Saddleback Mountain.

Ancient classics, like modern advertisements, "must be approached and studied like a natural object," as we will see in a moment (*A Week*, 183). For now, Thoreau examines the business parts of a paper "by the light of the fire." He imagines "prices

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[45] When Ishmael, himself a star-gazer, "a dreamy meditative man," stands on the mast-head in *Moby-Dick*, he experiences a moment of high inspiration much like that of Thoreau on Saddleback Mountain [Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage, White-Jacket: Or, The World in A Man-of-War, Moby-Dick: Or, The White Whale* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 958]. "There you stand," Melville writes, "lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves . . . . For the most part, in this tropic whaling life, a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no afflictions; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks; are never troubled with the thought of what you shall have for dinner —" (958). On Saddleback, Thoreau is of course reading the "gazettes," but Thoreau's experience of even the most mundane "advertisements" seems sublime (*A Week*, 150-51). The life of Ishmael's mast-head moment stands somehow separate — above or apart from the problems of material existence. Ishmael's experience, high above the deck of the Pequod, opposes the fast pace of industrial work taking place on the ship below. "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditativeness; and who offers to ship wit the Phaedon instead of Bowditch in his head," Melville writes (961). "Beware of such a one, I say: your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm richer" (261). Most readers of this passage recognize Melville's reference to Emerson's image of "the transparent eye-ball" in *Nature*. Thoreau's vision of mountain-top reading can be viewed in the same transcendentalist context. Further citations will correspond with the Library of America edition of *Moby-Dick*.

[46] Gould, "Henry David Thoreau," cited above.

current" as if they "were respectable in some measure as tide and meteorological tables." "The very names of commodities" suddenly become "poetic, and suggestive as if they had been inserted into some pleasing poem." The very names of commercial objects — "Lumber, Cotton, Sugar, Hides, Guano, Logwood" — somehow seem exalted when viewed alongside (indeed as part of) the eternal flow of nature. Thoreau's reading struggles to unify diverse elements. "Some sober, private, and original thought would have been grateful to read there," Thoreau concludes, but he will make due with a "critical" reading of "advertisements" and "editorials." The strength of more substantial readings, which could just as easily have "been written, on a mountain-top," contrast "the very texture" — the "weak[ness]" — of "opinions and sentiments" so popular "down below."

Thoreau's reference to "some old classic" points forward to his discussion of the "sober, private, and original thoughts" of ancient Greek lyric poets at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter. Just as the Saddleback Mountain digression, at the beginning of the chapter, naturalizes the business parts of a paper, Thoreau's account of ancient classics seems to elevate — or sacralize — signs of commercial activity and industrial labor along the Merrimack River.[47] Quasi-religious acts of reading consistently rub up against signs

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[47] In *The Machine in The Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Leo Marx shows how Thoreau tries to reconcile "industrial growth" with his vision of nature (26). Other scholars have argued that Thoreau's protest against nineteenth-century capitalism tried to "spiritualize" the economy. See Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Richard F. Teichgraeber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). My reading draws on this scholarship, but emphasizes Thoreau's quasi-religious use of the ancient classics as an "antidote" to the rise of industrial modernity. Thoreau adopted this move, or use of the

of industry and commerce in Thoreau's travel narrative. Thoreau portrays the process of reading ancient classics as a form of thoughtful intellectual wandering, a quasi-religious pursuit that cannot be counted, cut up, commodified, and construed solely in terms of markets and money. Reading emerges at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter, in other words, as a form of imaginative travel — a mode of inquiry and habit of mind — that slows down to pay close attention along the way. At the end as well as the beginning of Thoreau's "Tuesday" chapter, reading "is transformational."[48]

Creative reading as is not just a transformational act in *A Week*. It is a form of antimaterialism. In this respect Thoreau sounds most like Professor Felton and the romantic new humanists. Thoughtful intellectual wandering, in Thoreau's portrait, serves as a viable alternative to the fast pace of modern business and industrial society. Just as twenty-first century classicists argue that the distinctly American history of liberal learning emphasizes the value of education as a form of human development, that is, a vehicle for the cultivation, in Martha Nussbaum's words, "of informed, independent, and

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classics as a form of antimaterialism, from Cornelius Felton and the Harvard classicists. See Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 5, 44-48.

[48] Andrew Bennett, ed. and introd., *Readers and Reading* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 12. In his introduction, Bennett discusses the notion of trance and transformation: "'Reading,' Derrida declares, 'is transformational.' Reading may be understood in terms of what we might call the 'trance of reading' – 'trance' as in transition or transit, transference, transposition, translation, transformation, transgression and, finally, entrancement. In the trance of reading, the identity of the reading subject is itself unstable, yet to be determined or constituted in the 'experience' of reading. In its most extreme form, the trance of reading would involve forgetting one's surroundings, being 'lost in a book' – in what Blanchot calls the 'fascination' of reading and what Derrida refers to, in a portmanteau neologism, as *delireium*. As William Ray comments, glossing Georges Poulet's theory of reading, 'For the reader thus absorbed, a trance-like state ensues, in which the active intending of a meaning effaces, rather than constitutes, personal identity" (12).

sympathetic democratic citizens," Thoreau portrays wide and eager reading — broad-gauged, widely diffuse learning — as a kind of counterpoint to what he calls, in 1837, the commercial spirit of modern times.[49] Thoreau's "Tuesday" chapter marks a high point in his antimaterialist argument. The entire chapter works up to a concluding portrait of the pleasure and challenge of reading "in an age of 'work.'"[50] Thoreau's travel narrative explores how best to read "slowly" — how to pursue higher learning in an age "of haste," an age "of unseemly and immoderate hurry-scurry, which is eager to 'get things done' at once." Nietzsche's description of a philologist's work is apt. Thoreau's first book is "nothing" if not a narrative that "will drive to despair every one who is 'in a hurry.'"[51]

This is another sense in which the experience of reading *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* compares favorably to the thrill of navigating the pages of *Moby-Dick*. Both books develop the theme of thoughtful intellectual wandering, conceived as sailing on the river, on one hand, and traveling the ocean on the other. In *A Week* and *Moby-Dick*, travel on the water mirrors the movement of ranging speculation, a mode of inquiry that dramatizes the "occasional flashings forth" of a "working imagination."[52] Like Ishmael on the mast-head, the Thoreau brothers "tow" us "ten wakes around the world," as they stop to discuss an astonishing range of world historical, religious, literary, and philosophical texts. Their wandering ranges through broad space and deep time —

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[49] Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 18. See my introduction for further discussion of Nussbaum's education philosophy in the context of other twenty-first century new humanists.

[50] Nietzsche, 8.

[51] Nietschze, 8-9.

[52] Eckel, "Reading With Wonder."

but often comes back to the study of ancient classics. The Thoreau brothers in this sense practice "the leisurely art" of Nietzschean philology. Their intellectual wandering is creative work. The two brothers "step to the side," and "leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow," as they read books and discuss ideas along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.[53] In these moments of contemplation, the mind of the Thoreau brothers — like the "spirit" of Melville's narrator — "becomes diffused through time and space."[54] A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is organized around similar moments of inspiration, passages that approximate the flow of creative intellectual labor, an imaginative pursuit that the Thoreau brothers "carry out" as "slow, fine work."[55]

This is the work of an American classical scholar. In shared moments of inspired thought and reading, the Thoreau brothers achieve "nothing if not *lento*." Their practice of higher learning clashes with the fast pace of modern society throughout the "Tuesday" chapter of *A Week*. emerges as an alternative to the fast pace of modern society. The Thoreau brothers struggle to reconcile the richness of intellectual life — a loving part of the relationship they shared together — with the problem of material change in the modern world around them. At the end of the "Tuesday" chapter, Thoreau sets the tone for creative reading by describing how he and his brother travelled north to the "Souhegan, or *Crooked River*," a tributary of the Merrimack (*A Week*, 177). "During the heat of the day," Thoreau writes, "we rested on a large island a mile above the mouth of

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[53] Nietzsche, 8.

[54] *Moby-Dick*, 962.

[55] Nietzsche, 8.

this river, pastured by a herd of cattle, with steep banks and scattered elms and oaks, and a sufficient channel for canal-boats on each side" (*A Week*, 180). Thoreau's reference to "canal-boats" in this passage bends back on his earlier discussion of boat-building, a digression to which we will return later. "When we made a fire to boil some rice for our dinner," Thoreau continues, toward the end of the "Tuesday" chapter, "the flames spreading amid the dry grass, and the smoke curling silently upward and casting grotesque shadows on the ground, seemed phenomena of the noon, and we fancied that we progressed up the stream without effort, and as naturally as the wind and tide went down, not outraging the calm days by unworthy bustle or impatience" (*A Week*, 180). A feeling of slowed time and heightened consciousness washes over the narrative, as Thoreau works up to his portrait of reading the ancient classics in the final pages of the "Tuesday" chapter. The Thoreau brothers proceed "with mental doors ajar." They read books the same way they perceive nature, that is, "with delicate fingers and eyes." Thoreau and his brother share lunch on their own private island, and after epic "feasting" they "recline" under a set of "island trees" (*A Week*, 182). For their "minstrel" they "call on" the ancient Greek poet Anacreon (*A Week*, 182).

Thoreau's invocation of lyric idleness is one moment of "timeless time" among many in his travel narrative.[56] More often than not, these moments include reference to

[56] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), 386. Abrams describes the romantic concept of "the moment," locating it within the long history of Western spirituality, "the 'moment' (in Augustine's *Confessions*, *momentum*, and in German writers, *der Augenblick*, or *der Moment*) . . . stresses its paradoxical attribute of timeless time" (386). "Many Romantic writers," Abrams continues, "testified to a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment seems to arrest what is

the ancient classics. Thoreau takes on the tone of a heroic classical scholar. He presents himself as "an enthusiastic soul," to recall the words of Professor Felton: a heroic scholar "lead[s] onward — to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles" (*OCL*, 331). The Thoreau brothers "enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics" (*OCL*, 330). Local tales morph into discussion of classical texts and ancient events, as the two brothers lounge along the river, thus creating a web of associations. The brothers' conversation — the flow of the travel narrative itself — reflects "a dialectical process of alienation and return," the movement of *bildung*, or growth,, "in which the mind continually stretches beyond its ordinary point of view."[57] This is the movement of transcendental higher learning. "I lately met with an old volume from a London bookshop, containing the Greek Minor Poets," Thoreau continues, "and it was a pleasure to read once more only the words, Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus, — those faint poetic sounds and echoes of a name, dying away on the ears of us modern men; and those hardly more substantial sounds, Mimnermus, Ibycus, Alcaeus, Stesichoros, Menander. They lived not in vain. We can converse with these bodiless fames without reserve or personality" (*A Week*, 183).[58]

The Thoreau brothers become Greek.[59] Their out-of-doors reading of "Greek

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passing, and is often described as an intersection of eternity and time" (385). The transcendentalists often describe the process of reading in these same terms.

[57] Good and Garrison, 51.

[58] The "old volume" Thoreau refers to here was given to him by Bronson Alcott. The book itself now lives in the Fruitlands library. See Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Kramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[59] "Like their romantic Hellenist counterparts in England and Germany," Caroline Winterer writes, Cornelius Felton and new humanists in the United States "imagined the

Minor Poets" turns into a celebration of ancient classics, a reading conducted "without reserve." Like Professor Felton himself, and the German scholar D. A. Wyttenbach, Thoreau seems to "imbibe the spirit" of ancient authors, as if to lose his own "personality" — only for a moment — in the process.[60] "I know of no studies so composing as those of the classical scholar," Thoreau writes (*A Week*, 183). "When we have sat down to them,"

> life seems as still and serene as if it were very far off, and I believe it is not habitually seen from any common platform so truly and unexaggerated as in the light of literature. In serene hours we contemplate the tour of the Greek and Latin authors with more pleasure than the traveller does the fairest scenery of Greece or Italy. Where shall we find a more refined society? That highway down from Homer and Hesiod to Horace and Juvenal is more attractive than the Appian. Reading the classics, or conversing with those old Greeks and Latins in their surviving works, is like walking amid the stars and constellations, a high and by way serene to travel. Indeed, the true scholar will be not a little of an astronomer in his habits. Distracting cares will not be allowed to obstruct the field of his vision, for the higher regions of literature, like astronomy, are above storm and darkness. (*A Week*, 183)

Thoreau's account of reading the classics marks a "rise to authority," a moment of heightened vision and "timeless time" that ultimately does not last.[61] At his high point Thoreau takes on the tone of Harvard classicism. "Reading the classics" is an

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shift from words to worlds, as a process of becoming Greek, literally of self-transformation through a historicized encounter with the classical past" (*The Culture of Classicism*, 78-9). For Winterer's concept of "the shift from words to worlds," namely, the change in antebellum pedagogical approaches, from the study of classical grammar on the sentence level to holistic and imaginative engagement with texts and ancient culture, see T*he Culture of Classicism*, 77-98. Also see my discussion of Felton as a leading proponent of new humanism in chapter one.

[60] See my discussion of Wyttenbach, as cited by Felton, in chapter one.
[61] In "Exaltadas: A Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism," Phyllis Cole and Jane Argensinger describe Elizabeth Peabody's account of reading in "A Vision" as "a rise to authority" (6).

imaginative activity, in Thoreau's account, much like the sacred movement of "walking." Thoreau's "classical scholar" is a cosmic wanderer, a "*Sainte Terrer*," one who travels "amid the stars and constellations," much like other romantic figures in the history of nineteenth-century American thought and literature, including Felton's heroic classical scholar.[62] "Distracting cares will not be allowed to obstruct" the field of a true scholar's "vision, for the higher regions of literature, like astronomy, are above storm and darkness." Thoreau interprets literary and intellectual activity as cosmic movement across broad space and deep time. A true scholar's "mind continually stretches" out, in Thoreau's portrait, moving beyond its own universe, beyond its own local perspective and "ordinary point of view."[63]

In such a moment of creative reading, modern "life seems as if it were very far off." Reading the classics, Professor Felton explains, takes a true scholar "out of the influences immediately around him" (*OCL*, 314). "We are disposed to permit our thoughts and feelings to repose too much upon objects near us," Felton lectured in 1830, "and thus a constant reference to self becomes the habitual direction of our thoughts" (*OCL*, 315). The direction of a true scholar's mind is always outward and away from the self. A true scholar's mind extends upward, as it were, to greater summits, higher mountains, and in this way the self becomes enlarged. No "common platform," Thoreau agrees, gives us a broader view of human life than "the light of literature." Elizabeth

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[62] Thoreau develops the theme of cosmic wandering in his essay on "Walking" (*Collected Essays and Poems*, 225 *passim*). As we have seen, Felton portrays the ideal classical scholar as "an enthusiastic soul," one who "lead[s] onward — to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles" (*OCL*, 331).

[63] Good and Garrison, 51.

Peabody describes a similar moment of heightened vision in 1843, as we have seen. In her account of creative reading, Peabody is swept off her feet. All the "real personages of history," and all "the fictitious beings of poetry and romance — equally palpable —" become "present" to her.[64] Peabody's experience is empowering. Thoreau's account of reading the ancient classics charts a similar rise to "intellectual and priestly power."[65] Like Peabody's panoramic vision of reading, Melville's account of Ishmael standing on the masthead, and Emerson's portrayal of the transparent eyeball, Thoreau's classical scholar "loses his identity" in something larger than himself.[66] The process of reading becomes a quasi-religious quest, an intellectual journey and transformative act — part of a larger process of rebirth and renewal that the Thoreau brothers experience over and over again in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. The Thoreau brothers also interpret the natural landscape, read local lore, and write in their journals along the way.

These moments are highly textual. They chart the height of creative intellectual experience, "the activity of a truly living and integrative mind."[67] Yet such heights are

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[64] Peabody, "A Vision," 13.

[65] Cole and Argensinger, 6.

[66] *Moby-Dick*, 961.

[67] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 276. See my discussion of creative reading as a variety of Coleridgean joyfulness in chapter one. " 'Joy,'" according to Abrams, "is a central and recurrent term in the Romantic vocabulary which often has a specialized meaning. In Coleridge's philosophy of the one and many, in which a central concern is reconciliation of subject and object in an act of perception, 'joy' signifies the conscious accompaniment of the activity of a fully living and integrative mind. As he defines the term in his Philosophical Lectures, it is the state of abounding vitality — necessary to the working of the creative power of genius — which, by breaking down the boundaries of the isolated consciousness, relates the self both to other human selves and to an outer nature which it has inanimated, and so made compatible with itself" (276).

"unsustainable."[68] Inspiration is fleeting, in Thoreau's portrait, and knowledge seems always incomplete. There is always another mountain. The Thoreau brothers' heightened experience of intellectual sympathy, or *Einfuhlung,* may "arrest what is passing," in other words, but the two brothers' thoughts — Thoreau' travel narrative itself — always moves on to the next thing.[69] Moments of revelatory reading, writing, and thinking seem forever on the move in *A Week*: the narrative shifts back and forth, mingling "serene hours" of contemplation with more violent images associated with the rise of industry and commerce (*A Week,* 183). The slow rhythm of imaginative travel "down from Homer and Hesiod to Horace and Juvenal" run headlong into swift currents of emerging industrial modernity (*A Week,* 183). The Thoreau brothers stop to read and write along the river, but they must pass onward. Thoreau's "composing" reflection on "the higher regions of literature" is surrounded by sights and sounds associated with the "immoderate hurry-scurry" of business culture and industrial time (*A Week,* 183).[70] Reading the classics may slow the pace of the Thoreau brothers' thoughts, establishing "moments" of "timeless time," yet signs of rapid change nonetheless up at every twist and turn in Thoreau's first book.

Reading can momentarily suppress the turbulence of "this restless, nervous,

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[68] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 386.

[69] Abrams, 385. For my discussion of the concept of "intellectual sympathy," or *Einfuhlung*, see chapter one.

[70] Nietzsche, 8. Railway companies, according to the cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch, helped promote standardized time, as the train itself sped up the time it took to travel from one place to another in the nineteenth century. The locomotive sped up time and collapsed space, a phenomenon that was both thrilling and disorienting to riders. See Shivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (1977; Oakland: The University of California Press, 2014).

bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century," but the problems of modernity persist (*Walden*, 584). Ancient classics help stretch our mind "beyond the limits" in which we live, expanding the boundaries of self, but Thoreau's narrative grapples with the narrow "interests" of modern commercial and business culture as well.[71] In the pages leading up to Thoreau's reading of the ancient Greek poetry, just before the two brothers "recline" on their island, "a mile above" the intersection of "the Souhegan, or *Crooked* River" on the Merrimack, for example, Thoreau observes "some carpenters at work . . . mending a scow on the green and sloping bank" (*A Week*, 174). The following passage is part of Thoreau's ongoing portrayal of commercial activity along the Merrimack River. When Thoreau observes "shipping interests" at work in *A Week*, his classical imagination takes over. "The strokes" of the carpenters' "mallets echoed from shore to shore, and up and down the river," Thoreau writes,

> and their tools gleamed in the sun a quarter of a mile from us, and we realized that boat-building was as ancient and honorable an art as agriculture, and that there might be a naval as well as a pastoral life. The whole history of commerce was made manifest in that scow turned bottom upward on the shore. Thus did men begin to go down upon the sea in ships; *quaequae diu steterant in montibus altis, Fluctibus ignotis insultavere carinae;* "and keels which had long stood on high mountains careered insultingly (*insultavere*) over unknown waves." (*A Week*, 174-5)

Thoreau's reference to Ovid's leaps into discussion of another book, an account taken from Thoreau's reading of Alexander Henry's *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories* (1809). This early American explorer and "his Indians," Thoreau writes, "consumed two days in making canoes" ("*carinae*") of the bark of the elm tree,"

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[71] "Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market day or night," Thoreau writes in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, "does any divinity stir within him? His highest duty to fodder and water his horses! What is his destiny compared with the shipping interests?" (328).

in which they carried themselves to Fort Niagara. "It is a worthy incident in a journey, a delay as good as much rapid traveling," Thoreau muses (*A Week*, 175). His reference to early American boat-building is followed by quick association with another classical text." "A good share of our interest in Xenophon's story of retreat," Thoreau writes, "is in the manoevers to get the army safely over the rivers, whether on rafts or logs or fagots, or sheep-skins blown up" (A Week, 175). This rumination circles back to Thoreau's initial discussion of modern "boat-building" along the Merrimack River. "Canal-boats" are everywhere in the "Tuesday" chapter. Thoreau weaves together the theme of "boat-building" — ancient and modern — by referring to a series of interlocked texts. Ovid, Alexander Henry, Xenophon — early American and ancient Greek boat-builders — all seem to become one. The Thoreau brothers also have built their own *carina*. For "where could they better afford to tarry meanwhile than on the banks of a river?" (*A Week*, 175).

Thoreau's account of boat-building tarries, lingering in a world of thought and literature, much like the ranging conversation of the Thoreau brothers in the pages of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Thoreau's travel narrative pauses, leaps forward and backward in time, constantly bends back on itself and extends outward by indulging its own extensive network of "digressions," to recall the words of James Russell Lowell. "We come upon them like snags, jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up stream or drifting down," Lowell conclude. To many readers after Lowell, Thoreau's digressions are indeed "out of proportion and out of place, and mar our Merrimacking dreadfully." Yet the very idea of digressive and roving curiosity — the pleasure and value of becoming "so absorbed" in literary-historical

"discussions" — strikes to the heart of Thoreau's intellectual project in *A Week*.[72] The book's "out of place" sense of "proportion" — its astonishing ambition and wide range of reference — is what makes the book a pleasure to read. Nietzsche admits his own style of thought and writing, after all, is perhaps "perverted."[73] Thoreau's own intellectual habit seems out of place in the fast pace of industrial society. As mentioned earlier, Thoreau's view from "the higher regions of literature" seems surrounded by signs of industry and commerce in the "Tuesday" chapter (*A Week*, 183). "Being now fairly in the stream of this week's commerce," Thoreau writes earlier in "Tuesday," "we began to meet with boats more frequently, and hailed them from time to time with the freedom on sailors" (*A Week*, 169). "One can hardly imagine a more healthful employment, or one more favorable to contemplation and the observation of nature. Unlike the mariner," modern river boatmen "have the constantly varying panorama of the shore to relive the monotony of their labor" (*A Week*, 170).

The Thoreau brothers are boatmen too. Their own panoramic view of books and nature — the higher regions of literature — seems to relieve, or somehow subvert, the threat of monotony implied by signs of commercial activity and industrial work along the river. Thoreau and his brother mingle with modern boatmen, who glide along the Merrimack and "commonly carry down wood or bricks, — fifteen or sixteen cords of wood, and as many thousand bricks, at a time, — and bring back stores for the country, consuming two or three days each way between Concord and Charlestown" (*A Week*, 170). These sailors "are not subject to great exposure, like the lumberers of Maine, in

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[72] Lowell, 47.

[73] Nietzsche, 8.

any weather, but inhale the healthfulness of breezes, being slightly encumbered with clothing, frequently with the head and feet bare," Thoreau muses (*A Week*, 170). "When we met them at noon as they were leisurely descending the stream, their busy commerce did not look like toil, but rather like some ancient oriental game still played on a larger scale, as the game of chess, for instance, handed down to this generation" (*A Week*, 170). Much like the "carpenters" whose "mallets echoed from shore to shore, and up and down the river," the work of modern river boatmen, in Thoreau's portrait, is "played" out "on a large scale" (*A Week*, 174, 169). Their activity seems caught for moment of repose, captured in an instant of "timeless time," similar to the Thoreau brothers' own work of "contemplation" when they stop along the Merrimack to study their volume of "the Greek Minor Poets" (*A Week*, 174, 169). The Thoreau brothers' reading of Anacreon blends with the sound of "mallets" and the rhythm of commercial boating in the "Tuesday" chapter. Physical work seems akin to literary labor, in Thoreau's account, and the two activities seem molded into one. Modern river boatmen, like Nietzsche's philologist, almost seem to work "with mental doors ajar," indeed, "with delicate fingers and eyes."[74]

Thoreau slows down the activity of commercial labor. He spiritualizes it. Just as the business parts of the paper become suddenly as interesting as nature, high on top of Saddleback Mountain, Thoreau tries to integrate signs of industry and commerce along the Merrimack River into his own transcendentalist worldview. The Thoreau brothers consistently view modern life through the broad lens of deep time. Thoreau's modern river boatmen belong to the heroic ages. "All the phenomena which surround him are

[74] Nietzsche, 9.

simple and grand, and there is something impressive, even majestic, in the very motion he causes, which will naturally be communicated to his own character, and he feels the slow, irresistible movement under him with pride, as if it were his own energy" (*A Week,* 171). The slow, irresistible movement that Thoreau's modern boatmen feel under them is the river of time. Modern work along the Merrimack seems integrated into the eternal flow of nature and human culture throughout the ages. Anacreon, Ovid, Xenophon, images of "some ancient Oriental game" and early American event, all invest the Thoreau brothers' own experience with "something impressive, even majestic." Reading modern experience through the lens of ancient classics seems to make all human activity more "simple and grand." Life seems true and pure, somehow unexaggerated in the light of literature. Yet tension persists in Thoreau's narrative. Thoreau and his brother embarked on their journey in the early summer of 1839. By the time Thoreau was writing and revising *A Week,* in the mid- to late- 1840s, he observes how swiftly life has changed along the river. "Since our voyage the railroad on the bank has been extended, and there is now but little boating on the Merrimack," Thoreau writes (*A Week,* 173). "All kinds of produce and stores were formerly conveyed by water, but now nothing is carried up the stream, and almost wood and bricks alone are carried down, and these are also carried on the railroad. The locks are fast wearing out, and will soon be impassable, since the tolls will not pay the expense of repairing them, and so in a few years there will be the end of boating on the river" (*A Week*, 173).

Thoreau's attempt to spiritualize commercial activity along the Merrimack, his attempt to raise modern river boats into the higher regions of literature, so to speak, ultimately falls back to the reality of present conditions. The effect is poignant. A

"concern with loss and the effort at recovery," according to Linck C. Johnson, is perhaps "the central concern and overarching drama of *A Week*."[75] In the span of a few years, Thoreau predicts, there will be no boating on the Merrimack, let alone the kind of journey so simple and grand as that experienced by Thoreau and his brother in 1839. The narrative flow of *A Week* seems to live both inside and outside the nineteenth century. In the conclusion of *Walden*, Thoreau famously chooses "not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but to stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by" (*Walden*, 584). Like any good philologist, Thoreau "step[s] to one side."[76] His sense of removal from the modern world is a way to more thoughtfully engage with it. He must keep his mental doors ajar — and read with delicate fingers and eyes. This is the great value of slow reading: it is a dialectic of alienation and return, in which the scholar's individual perspective becomes enlarged. Reading the classics may not lead to a single mechanical agent. It may not increase our fortunes a single dollar. But it offers a strong alternative — the foundation for a rich and varied life of the mind. Thoreau's travel narrative argues that we too should engage in the long, slow work of education for human development. We should journey along with the Thoreau brothers, and work to cultivate an informed, independent, sympathetic, and deeply imaginative *way of being* in the world.[77]

Thoreau extends this same new humanist educational argument in *Walden*.

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[75] Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, 51.

[76] Nietzsche, 8.

[77] Here I intentionally echo Nussbaum's language in *Not for Profit*, 18 *passim*.

Thoreau had a "profound faith in words, in the power of a text to transform the lives of readers and, consequently, to reform the institutions of society."[78] He believed thoughtful intellectual wandering has the power to transform — redeem — the modern self, by expanding the mind and deepening individual perspective. To this end, Thoreau's "Tuesday" chapter concludes with an extended discussion of the ancient Greek poet Anacreon, whose "odes are like gems of pure ivory" (*A Week,* 183). "There is something strangely modern about him," Thoreau writes (*A Week*, 183). The poems of Anacreon "possess an ethereal and evanescent beauty like the summer evenings," a beauty "*which you must perceive with the flower of the mind*" (*A Week,* 183). "You have to consider them, as the stars of a lesser magnitude, with the side of the eyes, and look aside from them to behold them," Thoreau proclaims (*A Week,* 183). "They charm us by their serenity and freedom from exaggeration and passion, and by a certain flower-like beauty, which does not propose itself, but must be approached and studied like a natural object" (*A Week,* 183).

Nature and the classics — the vast landscape of ancient poetry — has a calming effect in Thoreau's travel narrative. Thoreau's reading of Anacreon fits well with the mood of the moment at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter. Such ancient lyrics "are not gross, as has been presumed, but always elevated above the sensual" (*A Week*, 184). As the Thoreau brothers "recline" on their leafy "island," just a step off course on the bustling Merrimack River, their minds are full of "lightness" — a feeling of "charm" and "serenity" that mirrors the flow of Anacreon's lyric poetry (*A Week,* 183). The Thoreau

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[78] Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau,* 53. Johnson does not connect Thoreau's faith in "higher" learning to the culture of Harvard new humanism.

brothers become Greek, as they rest outside the turbulence of "this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century" (*Walden*, 584). They share a moment of "timeless time": the process of reading is sacred and restorative. The Thoreau brothers' experience of reading ancient poetry at high noon along the Merrimack celebrates a fraternal love that is "elevated above the sensual" (*A Week*, 184). Such a moment reflects the loving nature of the two brothers' literary and intellectual relationship. "Here was that 'pleasant harbor,'" Thoreau writes, describing the small island where the Thoreau brothers stopped to read the ancient odes of Anacreon (*A Week*, 182). Here, under the shade of trees, "the weary voyager could read the journal of some other sailor, whose bark had ploughed, perchance, more famous and classical seas" (*A Week*, 182).

Thoreau's reference to more famous and classical seas recalls the lines from Ovid, cited earlier in the "Tuesday" chapter, as well as Thoreau's discussion of early American and modern boat-building. The image of weary voyagers, at the same time, calls up Thoreau's earlier reading of Virgil and Homer in the "Sunday" chapter of *A Week*. Much like "Tuesday," Thoreau's "Sunday" chapter views modern life through the purifying lens of ancient classics. In "Sunday" Thoreau's account of reading epic poetry rubs up against images associated with the rise of antebellum industry and commerce. "What would we not give for some great poem to read now, which would be in harmony with the scenery," Thoreau muses, "For if men read aright, methinks they would never read anything but poems" (*A Week*, 74). Thoreau spends a large amount of time, some might say a disproportionate amount of time, reading (and writing) poetry in the lines of *A*

Week.[79] Poetry takes up a lot of space in the narrative. "It is enough if Homer but say the sun sets," Thoreau continues in "Sunday" (*A Week*, 75). "He is as serene as nature" (*A Week*, 75). And yet, just a few pages before his celebration of epic poetry, in all its serenity and grandeur, Thoreau observes a scene that hints at trouble to come. The Merrimack "was devoted from the first to the service of manufactures," Thoreau explains (*A Week*, 71). "Issuing from the iron region of Franconia, and flowing through still uncut forests, by inexhaustible ledges of granite, with Squam, and Winnipiseogee, and Newfound, and Massabesic Lakes for its mill-ponds, the Merrimack River

> falls over a succession of natural dams, where it has been offering its *privileges* in vain for ages, until at last the Yankee race came to *improve* them. Standing at its mouth, look up its sparkling stream to its source, — a silver cascade which falls all the way from the White Mountains to the sea, — and behold a city on each successive plateau, a colony of human beaver around every fall. Not to mention Newburyport and Haverhill, see Lawrence, and Lowell, and Nashua, and Manchester, and Concord, gleaming one above the other. When at last it has escaped from under one of the factories, it has a level and unmolested passage to the sea, a mere *waste water*, as it were, bearing little with it but its fame; its pleasant course revealed by the morning fog which hangs over it, and the sails of the few small vessels which transact the commerce of Haverhill and Newburyport. But its real vessels are railroad cars, and its true and main stream, flowing by an iron channel farther south, may be traced by a long line of vapor amid the hills, which no morning wind ever disperses, to where it empties into the sea at Boston. This side is the louder murmur now. Instead of the scream of a fish-hawk scaring the fishes, is heard the whistle of the steam-engine, arousing a country to its progress. (*A Week*, 71)

This passage anticipates Thoreau's attempt to spiritualize the activity of commerce in the "Tuesday" chapter. Both chapters, "Sunday" and "Tuesday," indeed, Thoreau's travel

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[79] See McGill, "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 359: "interpolated poems are as much of an occasion for the narrative [of *A Week*] as the river journey itself. Thoreau's text demonstrates a profound engagement with poetry on a number of levels," namely, as writer and reader, scholar and poet.

narrative as a whole, views the modern world in dialogue with the deep time of ancient classics. The passage above, calling up images of a whistling steam engine, which leaves "a long line of vapor amid the hills," is closely followed by Thoreau's praise of epic poetry. "Everything that is printed and bound in a book," Thoreau muses, "contains some echo at least of the best that is in literature" (*A Week*, 73). "Indeed, the best books have a use, like sticks and stones, which is above or beside their design, not anticipated in the preface, nor included in the appendix" (*A Week*, 73). Thoreau makes use of the ancient classics, throughout *A Week*, not just as a way to invoke lyric idleness, but also as a way to infuse business and commercial activity — the loud murmur along the river — with epic grandeur. Even "the whistle of the steam engine," heard in the context of Virgil and Homer, seems strangely "arousing."[80] Yet the sound of the railcar, and Thoreau's portrayal of bustling activity along the river, nonetheless remains troubling. Newburyport and Haverhill, Lawrence, Lowell, Nashua, Manchester, and Concord, all appear "gleaming one above the other," in an image that recalls the gleaming of carpenters' "mallets" in the "Tuesday" chapter (*A Week*, 174). The "morning fog which hangs over" the river turns into "a long line of vapor," a path of smoke that seems at the

[80] Thoreau's rumination in "Sunday" goes on to praise the thrill of reading Homer. "There are few books which are fit to be remembered in our wisest hours, but the Iliad is the brightest in the serenest days, and embodies still all the sunlight that fell on Asia Minor. No modern joy or ecstasy of ours can lower its height or dim its lustre, but there it lies in the east of literature, as it were the earliest and latest production of the mind" (*A Week*, 77). Indeed, Thoreau continues, in a manner that anticipates his portrait of heroic reading in *Walden*: "He who resorts to the easy novel, because he is languid, does no better than if he took a nap. The front aspect of great thoughts can only be enjoyed by those who stand on the side whence they arrive. Books, not which afford us a cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring; such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions,—such call I good books" (*A Week*, 78). Thoreau brought Cornelius Felton's 1830 Greek language edition of Homer's *Iliad* to read by the shores of Walden Pond. See my discussion of Felton's American Iliad in chapter one.

same time beautiful and potentially destructive. What will happen to the "still uncut forests"? In the "Sunday" chapter, Thoreau imagines standing at the mouth of the Merrimack, looking up to "behold a city on each successive plateau, a colony of human beaver around every fall" (*A Week*, 71). The river is crammed with factories. Where are all the *non*human beavers, amidst the "natural dams" that have been "*improved*" by such a busy race of Yankee men? (*A Week*, 71).

Thoreau's portrait of his own "country" and "its progress" remains richly textured in *A Week*. The fast pace — the epic reach — of industry and commerce simultaneously attracts and repels him. As the Thoreau brothers travel leisurely along the river, they seem busy themselves: if not like human beavers, scurrying around a factory in Lowell, then the Thoreau brothers are busy grappling — trying to come to terms with — the fast pace of change in the modern world around them. In this light, Thoreau's reading of ancient classics seems almost an act of desperation. He wants to slow time, stall the progress of *A Week*, perhaps even put off the inevitability of human loss, pain, suffering, and death. Thoreau includes his own translation of eleven Anacreon lyrics at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter. These poems are followed by a more ominous set of images. "With one sail raised we swept slowly up the eastern side of the stream," Thoreau writes, "steering clear of the rocks, while, from the top of a hill which formed the opposite bank, some lumberers were rolling down timber to be rafted down the stream. We could see their axes and levers gleaming in the sun, and the logs came down with a dust and a rumbling sound, which was reverberated through the woods beyond us on our side, like the roar of artillery" (*A Week*, 188).

This final image is unsettling. It looks back to Thoreau's digression on "boat-

building," and his reference to Ovid, who imagined more classic ships, *quaequae diu steterant in montibus altis, Fluctibus ignotis insultavere carinae* (*A Week*, 175). The "tools" of modern ship-builders "gleamed in the sun," as we have seen, just as the "axes and levers" of loggers gleam at the end of the "Tuesday" chapter. These two passages — on boat-building and logging — frame Thoreau's discussion of reading the ancient classics and "the higher regions of literature" (*A Week*, 183). The Thoreau brothers stop to read "the Greek Minor Poets" amidst images amidst increasingly violent images that press in all around them (*A Week*, 169). This tension is not resolved in Thoreau's narrative. "But Zephyr," Thoreau writes, toward the end of the "Tuesday" chapter, "soon took us out of sight and hearing of this commerce" (*A Week*, 188).

Like the west wind, ancient classics carry the Thoreau brothers momentarily "out of sight and hearing" of modern American society. Images of human loss haunt the narrative, much like the "dense fog" that shrouds the two brothers at the beginning of the "Tuesday" chapter (*A Week*, 147). Thoreau describes the thrill of traveling in the forest, especially among mountains, in his Saddleback Mountain digression. But he warns that "we may come to a perpendicular precipice," one that "we need not jump off nor run our heads against" (*A Week*, 149). "A man may jump down his cellar stairs or dash his brains our against his chimney, if he is mad" (*A Week*, 149). There are hints of desperation barely beneath the surface of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. The problem of human suffering lingers between the lines. It is almost as if the pleasure of reading evades the pressures of modernity — and in this sense the passage of time and hurry-scurry of life, if only for a moment. This pattern emerges all the more

meaningfully in light of John Thoreau's death. *A Week* has often been interpreted as an elegy for the death of Thoreau's brother. The book is a celebration, at the same time, of the rich and varied intellectual life the two brothers shared together.

A Week is a form of protest as well. Thoreau's first book does not reflect his mature vision of reading as a form of social and political resistance, but there is an element of critique woven throughout the narrative. Reading the classics emerges as a form of resistance, so to speak, in Thoreau's travel narrative. Thoughtful intellectual wandering slows down time, resists the deadening effect of spending one's entire life "trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt," as Thoreau puts it in *Walden* (328). The Thoreau brothers shared a life of the mind together. They shared a life committed to slow reading and complete immersion in "higher" education. In this sense broad gauged, widely diffuse learning becomes for Thoreau a variety of nonconformism, a way of being and mode of life that challenges the reigning spirit of modern materialism — and narrow interests of business culture in the antebellum age. *Walden* can be viewed as an extension of the educational project in *A Week*. Both books portray reading as a form of antimaterialism. *A Week* and *Walden*, in this way, both adapt and extend the cultural reach of Harvard classicism.

Chapter Three

Heroic Reading in *Walden*

If Thoreau had "a profound faith in words, in the power of a text to transform the lives of readers and, consequently, to reform the institutions of society," as Linck C. Johnson has observed, then Thoreau's faith was firmly rooted in the romantic and new humanist vision of Cornelius Felton and the Harvard classicists.[1] Thoreau's "word-as-deed activism" developed alongside his philosophy of education.[2] His theory of political action *was* in many ways an educational concept, although this connection — namely, the mutually defining relationship between Thoreau's idea of "higher" learning and his mature political vision — has not been sufficiently traced by scholars. Stanley Cavell has argued that *Walden* can be viewed as "a text of political education for membership in the polis."[3] And Jack Turner, building on Cavell's reading, has usefully theorized the significance of Thoreau's "politics of *performing conscience*."[4] These accounts do not, however, consider the extent to which Thoreau revised, reworked, and applied classical college concepts in the process of articulating his combined political and educational vision.

Thoreau first developed his theory of books and reading as a form of antimaterialism in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. He extends this account in *Walden*, but Thoreau's

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[1] Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 53.

[2] See Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 60-74.

[3] Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 85.

[4] Turner, "Introduction: Thoreau as a Political Thinker," in *A Political Comapnion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 155.

maturing vision sharpens the social and political edge of his education philosophy. Conceived as "thoughtful intellectual wandering" that remains grounded in the study of ancient classics, higher learning continues to emerge in Thoreau's portrait as a kind of intellectual adventure, a variety of imaginative travel that has the power to challenge antebellum society's obsession with crass getting and spending.[5] Yet cultivating a "broad-gauged, widely diffused" life of the mind carries with it an increasing countercultural force, in Thoreau's evolving account.[6] Especially in the third chapter of *Walden,* Thoreau portrays himself as a heroic classical scholar, one whose theory of higher learning has the power to remake American society along more broadly humanist, egalitarian grounds. Thoreau's third chapter on "Reading" argues for the public — not just private — value of cultivating a rich and varied life of the mind. In many ways the Concord writer went to the woods to extend his undergraduate course of classical studies. Thoreau took Cornelius Felton's Greek language edition of the *Iliad* to read along the shores of Walden Pond. Thoreau's chapter on "Reading" stands as a romantic and new humanist manifesto, an account of "higher" learning that looks forward to the progressive theory of education that Thoreau wields most powerfully in his handling of the John Brown affair.

A Week and *Walden* can both be viewed as literary and intellectual training ground, textual performances in which Thoreau works out the political education theory that he used to fight the institution of American slavery in the wake of Harpers Ferry. Before turning to the "Reading" chapter of *Walden*, we can see how Thoreau sets up the countercultural nature of his

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[5] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture,* 19.

[6] Winterer, *The Classics and Culture,* 19.

educational vision in "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." The first two chapters of *Walden* extend the antimaterialist view of intellectual life that Thoreau portrays in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Creative reading comes into conflict with antebellum business and industrial culture beginning in the opening pages of *Walden*. The problem, Thoreau explains in "Economy," is that his Concord neighbors are not well employed. They do not have "leisure" enough for higher learning (*W*, 378). Thoreau is speaking, he says, "particularly" to "poor students in the text of *Walden* (325). He speaks "mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining about the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might hope to improve them" (*W*, 335). Much like Emerson, who warns young Dartmouth College students, in "Literary Ethics," that "the first duty" pressed upon them by antebellum society "will be to get land and money, place and name" in the world (*LE*, 111). Thoreau insists there are several more lives to live. The "condition" of those "who are said to live in New England," especially their "outward condition," Thoreau proclaims, should not "be as bad as it is" (*W*, 326). Thoreau implies his Concord neighbors are not really "living" at all. They are dead to the richness and variety of what Thoreau calls, in 1837, "a more intellectual and spiritual life."[7]

The threat of financial crisis lingers over Thoreau's chapter on "Economy," just as it does in Emerson's early education lectures. The antimaterialist bent of Harvard new humanist theory fit well with the transcendentalists' concern that antebellum society was running itself into the ground, in pursuit of economic growth rather than human development. Thoreau's neighbors spend most of their time "trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt" (*W*, 328).

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[7] Thoreau, *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, 117.

"The better part of a man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost" (*W*, 328). Farmers and merchants, lawyers and preachers, all have been "metamorphosed into a thing, into many things," as Emerson puts it in "The American Scholar" address (54). In a similar sense, Thoreau's chapter on "Economy" argues that his Concord neighbors have "no time to be any thing but a machine" (*W*, 327).

Heroic reading will remedy this problem, Thoreau asserts in the third chapter of *Walden*. His own "economy" was wide and eager reading, transcendental higher learning. Where Thoreau lived, at Walden Pond, gave him enough time and space "to transact" his own "private business" of wide and eager classical studies (*W*, 338). In many ways Thoreau lived for heroic books at Walden Pond. His reading ceased to be "private" when he published his thoughts, indeed, when he published the fruit of his wide and eager reading in the pages of *Walden* itself. Thoreau's reading becomes part of his public advocacy for transcendental higher learning, conceived in Thoreau's written work as a way of life, an essential human activity that cannot be counted, cut up, commodified, and construed solely in terms of markets and money. Higher learning challenges the industrial routine, the dull outer condition of nineteenth-century American life.

Thoreau is not making an argument against the value of hard work in the opening chapter of *Walden*. He takes issue with the kind of labor his neighbors pursue, the commercial way they choose to live their life. As Cornelius Felton argues in his lecture "On Classical Learning," there is no human endeavor "which presents nobler topics of eloquence, more exciting and elevating subjects of reflection, and, I may add, more useful fields of labor, than that of a man of letters" (*OCL*, 331). And yet, Thoreau complains in "Economy," a typical Concord citizen has

"*employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely*" (*W*, 349) Thoreau views heroic reading — "lamplight, stationary, and access to a few books" — as "next to necessaries," among the grossest of groceries, which in Thoreau's view remain central to the achievement of a fully human imaginative life (*W*, 333). "Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance or mistake," nonetheless, "are so occupied with the fractious cares and superfluously course labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them" (*W*, 327).

On this point Thoreau is remarkably consistent throughout his life and writing. In 1837, the day before Emerson delivered "The American Scholar" address, as we have seen, Thoreau make a plea for the value of intellectual activity over and above the commercial spirit of modern times. In *A Week*, Thoreau puts his hope for higher learning on display. "We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages," Thoreau proclaims in "Economy" (*W*, 331). "History, Poetry, Mythology! I know of no reading of another's experience so startling and informing as this would be" (*W*, 331). "Nature and human life," in Thoreau's evolving portrait, "are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" (*W*, 331). These statements look forward to Thoreau's main point in his third chapter on "Reading." Liberal education encourages us "to imagine experience from perspectives other than . . . [our] own," as Andrew Delbanco explains, in his own new humanist vision for higher learning in the twenty-first century United States.[8] "Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and joys of life are as old as

[8] Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 3.

Adam," Thoreau continues in "Economy" (*W*, 330). "But man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried" (*W*, 330).

Looking out the front door of his cabin at Walden Pond, in short, Thoreau says he "did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination"(*W*, 392). He associates the pure joy of modern intellectual life with the creative energy of reading ancient Greek and Latin classics. "Morning brings back the heroic ages," Thoreau writes in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" (*W*, 393.). "Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me" (*W*, 392). Thoreau was following the advice of Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton. Felton urged his students to read themselves *into* the ancient classics. Thoreau offers the same kind of advice to American students in the third chapter of *Walden*. Thoreau's theory of heroic reading, he claims, will help wake antebellum Americans up to a more intellectual and spiritual life, reforming nineteenth-century society in the process.

Thoreau's vision of classical education in the third chapter of *Walden* is more expansive — and egalitarian — than Cornelius Felton's. In the years following the publication of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau built on the countercultural vision of transcendental higher learning that he worked out beginning in his travel narrative. This trend — the political radicalization of Thoreau's education philosophy — continued after the publication of *Walden* in 1854 as well. Thoreau ultimately turned Harvard classicism against the new humanists, when he embraced John Brown as the most liberally educated American citizen

scholar in 1859. We see a stronger hint of the civic nature of Thoreau's education philosophy toward the end of his chapter on "Reading."

Thoreau's vision of "Reading" in *Walden*, in other words, takes us one step closer to his activist classicism, as he performed it at John Brown's memorial service in Concord on the day of Brown's execution. In a journal entry written during the winter of 1852, Thoreau comes close to the theory of heroic reading tha the held toward the end of his life. His portrait in the following passage highlights the "wild," liberating and life-giving power of books, over and above the "cold-blooded & methodical" mindset of institutional culture:

> I have sometimes imagined a library i.e. a collection of the works of true poets philosophers naturalists & c deposited not in a brick or marble edifice in a crowded and dusty city — guarded by cold-blooded & methodical officials — & preyed on by bookworms — In which you own no share, and are not likely to — but rather far away in the depths of a primitive forest — like the ruins of central American alcoves — the older books protecting the more modern from the elements — partially buried by the luxuriance of nature — which the heroic student could reach only after adventures in the wilderness, amid wild beasts & wild men — That to my imagination seems a fitter place for these interesting relics, which owe no small part of their interest to their antiquity — and whose occasion is nature — than the well preserved edifice — with its well preserved officials on the side of a city's square. (*PJ4*, P)

Thoreau's theory of "organic" books and reading bristles with oppositional energy. He wrote the passage above while working on the fourth draft of *Walden*. Just a few months earlier, in the fall of 1851, Thoreau read with great enthusiasm the Latin agricultural writer Marcus Porcius Cato, whose work Thoreau associated not only with the history of nature writing but also with Cato's hard-nosed politics. In December, coming off his inspired reading of Cato, Thoreau observed the thawing of a railroad cut near Walden Pond. This observation led him to a heightened sense of the living spirit — the creative energy — that animates all nature. In this context, Thoreau significantly reshaped his account of living in the woods by the shore of Walden Pond. In his

vision of "organic" reading, and later in *Walden*, Thoreau clearly associates the creative spirit of the living earth with the characteristic vitality of great books and authors. Thoreau's vision, linking the organic energy of both books and nature, underlies his conception of heroic reading in the third chapter of *Walden*.

Great books have a certain capacity, like nature, to inspire change. Ancient and modern classics — Thoreau's "universal liturgy" — possess tremendous oppositional energy, a character and liveliness that contrasts the dominant culture that reigns over institutional libraries, those bastions of "brick or marble" that are "guarded by cold-blooded and methodical officials." The great works imprisoned "in a brick or marble edifice, in a crowded dusty city" seem ruled by only a few administrators — guardians, as it were, of official academic and intellectual culture. Thoreau's organic library, in stark contrast, is full of movement: it seems more dynamic, more vital — like the flowing of nature — and open to the imagination of everyone. Thoreau's organic library is full of leaves of grass. He imagines "the works of true poets philosophers naturalists & c" as if they exist out in the open, "far away in the depths of a primitive forest, partially buried in the luxuriance of nature." The term "luxuriance" is operative. Thoreau's description of organic books and reading, and its association with nature, firmly opposes the "cold-blooded" stiffness of official libraries, and the narrow, calculating ideology that Thoreau associated with antebellum industrial and business culture. In "Life Without Principle," a lecture Thoreau repeated many times between 1854 and 1860, he characterizes nineteenth-century American life as dominated by nothing but "work, work, work."[9] Thoreau is not talking about

[9] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 349. Thoreau gave the lecture version of "Life Without Principle" many different titles as he repeated it between the years 1854 and 1860. He first gave the lecture on December 26, 1854 in New Bedford, Massachusetts, using the title "Getting a

creative work or intellectual labor in "Life Without Principle": the lecture is Thoreau's most strident critique of mid-century American materialist culture. "Life Without Principle" condenses Thoreau's new humanist critique of human "employment," as he articulates it in the opening chapters of *Walden*. "Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives," Thoreau lectures. "This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once."[10]

Thoreau's solution to the problem of work in "Life Without Principle" mirrors the answer he works out in "Economy" and extends in his chapter on "Reading." And it is this energy, driven by Thoreau's antimaterialist vision of higher learning, that he builds into his mature political philosophy. How can one live a rich and varied intellectual life in the face of antebellum business values? "The ways in which you may get money almost without exception lead downward," Thoreau proclaims. "If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure, that, for me, there would be nothing left to live for." Thoreau finds a more principled way of living through higher learning. "I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage," he summarizes in "Life Without Principle." "I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no

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Living." Later lecture titles included "The Connections Between Man's Employment and Higher Life," "What Shall It Profit?", and "Life Misspent," all of which look back to the question of human employment as Thoreau worked it out in *Walden*. The problem of how to get a living was a matter of life and death to Thoreau. This is all the more poignant given that he worked to publish "Life Without Principle," his most vehemently antimaterialist vision of what it means to live a good life, as he was on his deathbed in 1862. "Life Without Principle" appeared posthumously the following year.

[10] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 348-9.

more fated blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living." Thoreau says "there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business." His thesis in "Life Without Principle" captures his theory of heroic reading in *Walden*. "You must get your living by loving."[11]

Thoreau got his living by loving both books and nature during his two year stay at Walden. He pursued the life of a natural historian and classical scholar. This life, as Thoreau portrays it, flies in the face of the "employment" pursued by most of his Concord neighbors. Cornelius Felton, who was a close friend of Louis Agassiz, taught Harvard students to love books by entering fully into the spirit of the classics. Thoreau plunged into nature the same way. In his 1852 journal entry, Thoreau portrays his special collection of organic books as a free library, a reflection of human spirit that cannot be contained, controlled by any institutional force. Thoreau's "wild" books and authors cannot be "own[ed]" by "well-preserved officials," or somehow fixed forever in position, "on the side of a city square," "preyed upon by bookworms" and "restorers of readings, emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all decrees," as Emerson characterizes all representatives of institutional culture, those who are not intellectual self-made men (*AS*, 57). Truly wild books are more accessible to a population of creative readers. One must only reach out, explore, and find them.

Reaching is an important part of the educational process. Thoreau portrays heroic reading as an intellectual adventure, an imaginative journey that caries with it the inspiration for reform. This point speaks to a core irony of transcendental higher learning. Thoreau's philosophy of education and reading was born out of the institution of Harvard classicism, as was

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[11] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 350, 352.

Emerson's. But in the hands of Concord writers, classicism becomes a radically *anti-institutional* force. It is not just a form of antimaterialism, in Thoreau's maturing vision. Liberal education becomes a vehicle for upending the social conservatism of Harvard classicists themselves, many of whom, including Edward Everett and Cornelius Felton, were "well-preserved officials" who did not agree with the progressive social vision of the New England transcendentalists. Although Everett and Felton conceived the ancient classics as a form of antimaterialism, Thoreau ultimately associated their vision of liberal learning with the "cold-blooded" institutional and political culture he hated. Thoreau conceives his own version of "sabbath" day reading as more liberating. He "spiritualizes" higher learning in *Walden*, in short, just as he does in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, but Thoreau's vision of books and reading by 1854 more clearly challenges the cultural and intellectual authorities from which he derived it. Thoreau's view of education in his chapter on "Reading" emerges more clearly as a form of progressive civic engagement.

Thoreau associates liberal education with freedom. His view of ancient classics in his chapter on "Reading" forms the foundation of his mature liberation pedagogy. Reading is an activity which generates transformations. "With little more deliberation in the choice of pursuits," Thoreau begins, in the third chapter of *Walden*, "all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers" (*W*, 402). In 1837 Emerson proclaimed that the first influence on the mind of a true American scholar is the book of nature. The second influence is "the mind of the Past" (*AS*, 56). Thoreau agrees. "The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity," he writes, "and still the trembling robe remains raised" (*W*, 402). In his experience of heroic reading Thoreau feels transported. Much

like the Harvard new humanists, he is raised above or somehow outside of time. "I gaze upon as fresh a glory as" the Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher "once did," Thoreau explains, "since it was I in him that was so bold, and it was he in me that now reviews the vision" (*W*, 402). Yet Thoreau's concept of heroic reading is at the same time more expansive than that of Cornelius Felton, or the German scholar D. A. Wyttenbach, at least as Felton represents their view of education in his lecture "On Classical Learning." Thoreau enters the spirit of Greek and Latin classics as well as the mind of ancient Egypt and India. In Emerson's essay on "History," Emerson writes that we must become "Greeks, Romans," *and* "Turks," and Emerson, too, expanded his vision of creative reading to include modern as well as ancient classics. Thoreau's "universal liturgy," as he developed it in 1859, is likewise more inclusive: it is grounded in ancient classics but includes modern English and German poets as well. Thoreau even implies, as we will see, that John Brown's words are equal — and perhaps even better — than the ancient classics. "It is the highest compliment to suppose that in the intervals of conversation your companion has expanded and grown," Thoreau summarizes in his journal (*PJ1*, P). "By such politeness we may educate one another to some purpose. So I have felt myself educated sometimes — I am expanded and enlarged" (*PJ1*, P).

Thoreau applied the idea that reading expands the self to an astonishing range of books and writers. Wide and eager reading of the eastern classics, and modern authors, was not a pursuit unique to the transcendentalists. But Thoreau's emphasis on global intellectual wandering, as it were, does begin to distinguish his own vision of reading in *Walden* from the new humanist of figures like Cornelius Felton, whose scholarship was broad, but not as globally inclusive as the heroic reading of the Concord writers. Thoreau plays along with *and* pulls

against the culture of Harvard classicism. His account of lifting the veil of Isis or Maya is an implicitly textual moment, an example of sympathetic historical imagination. Thoreau imagines himself becoming Egyptian or Hindoo, lifting the veil of divinity and gaining direct knowledge of the gods. Such an experience is transformative. At first, Thoreau continues, he had no time for "Homer's Iliad" while living at Walden Pond (*W*, 402). He had a house to build, after all, and beans to hoe. One must work at hoeing and building, even digging in a ditch from time to time, as Thoreau confirmed in a letter to Horace Greeley, written in 1848.[12] But human employment must not stop there. You must also get your living by loving.

Thoreau's "residence" at Walden was ultimately "more favorable," he says, "not only to thought, but also to serious reading" (*W*, 402). His time in the woods was more favorable "than a university" (*W*, 402). Thoreau may press the limits of Harvard classicism, but his vision of reading remains at the same time grounded in Greek and Latin. Thoreau was a heroic classical scholar in residence while living at Walden Pond: "though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library," he writes, "I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate around the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper" (*W*, 402). Thoreau's course of reading, as he describes it, begins with the study of Greek and Latin and runs throughout the wilderness of world history, thought, and literature. Thoreau quotes the eighteenth-century Persian Poet, Mir

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[12] "Scholars are apt to think themselves privileged to complain as if their lot were a peculiarly hard one," Thoreau writes to Greeley, in a letter Greeley published in the New York *Tribune* on May 25, 1838. "How much have we heard about the attainment of knowledge under difficulties — of poets starving in garrets — of literary men depending on the patronage of the wealthy, and finally dying mad! It is time that men sang another son. — There is no reason why the scholar, who professes to be a little wiser than the mass of men, should not do his work in the ditch occasionally." Qtd. in Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 213-14.

Camar Uddin Mast, in the second paragraph of "Reading." "Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines" (*W*, 402). Much like Emerson's aunt, Sarah Ripley, Thoreau's reading is grounded in Greek and Latin classics but his higher learning ranges far and wide, reaching, in Thoreau's portrait, to all the sacred scriptures, the "Bibles" of the world (*W*, 405). Emerson, Thoreau, and Mrs. Ripley were all drink with books throughout their lives. Their "mind was purely receptive."[13] "The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them," Thoreau writes, in a line that perfectly captures the new humanist concept of sympathetic criticism (*W*, 406). Thoreau's theory of heroic reading argues that Concord citizens must learn to open themselves up, and read more imaginatively, like a romantic poet. Great books "have only been read as the multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically" (*W*, 406). To read "in a high sense," that is, astronomically, one must match the creative energy of great books and authors themselves. "The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling ranges from earth to heaven," Thoreau exclaims in a journal entry during the winter of 1853 *(PJ6,P.)*. A scholar's mind must roll with similar range and intensity.

Cultivating a rich and varied life of the mind takes many years, a lifetime of hard work, a great deal of concentration and heroic level of imaginative openness. "I am aware that such is not often the path followed by scholars of our country, but I do sincerely believe that the worth of classical learning will never be realized until some such method is adopted," Cornelius Felton lectured in 1830. "I know, too, it involves a depth of thought and wide range of studies, from

[13] Goodwin, 2.

which we are apt to shrink in alarm" (*OCL*, 315). The very "depth of thought and wide range of studies" that defines higher learning, in Thoreau's own account, is what sets a scholar's life apart from the way most antebellum Americans choose to live. "I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned," Thoreau muses in "Life Without Principle," "by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality. Our very intellect shall be macadamized, as it were, — its foundation broken into fragments for the wheels of travel to roll over; and if you would know what will make the most durable pavement, surpassing rolled stones, spruce blocks, and asphaltum, you have only to look into some of our minds which have been subjected to this treatment so long."[14] Such hardness of mind exists in stark contrast to the imaginative flexibility of heroic reading. "I kept Homer's Iliad on my table through the summer," Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "though I looked at his pages only now and then. Incessant labor with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained myself by the prospect of such reading in future" (*W*, 402).

The prospect of heroic reading is ultimately unlimited. Thoreau preferred reading Cornelius Felton's Greek language edition of Homer, though he also brought Pope's English language translation of the *Iliad* into the woods of Walden with him. "The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness," Thoreau continues, "for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate the morning hours to their pages" (*W*, 402-3). Thoreau makes abundantly clear that he is talking about heroic reading in the original ancient language:

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[14] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 362.

> The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages. The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our own mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have. The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity. They seem as solitary, and the letter in which they are printed as rare and curious, as ever. It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations. (*W*, 403)

In some ways this passage could have come from the mouth of Cornelius Felton, except that it captures the flair of Henry Thoreau. "We need to be provoked," Thoreau explains later in his chapter on "Reading": this is Thoreau's basic strategy in the text of *Walden*, and it reflects his broader theory of reading, writing, and transcendental higher learning itself (*W*, 409). *Walden* can be interpreted as "an educational demonstration" in the sense that Thoreau's own text, his own literary "employment" while living at Walden Pond, enacts the Emersonian and new humanist ethic of moral and intellectual awakening through creative reading — and writing — of great books.[15] Thoreau's reading of ancient classics, the core of what he calls "liberal studies," shapes the contour of his modern thought and writing — infusing the text of *Walden* with new energy (*W*, 409). Thoreau implies that his own text is a classic, almost by association. Creative reading and writing become part of the same dynamically interrelated, transformative act. This is Thoreau's literary labor — his practice of the liberal arts. Great books have no single meaning, but offer a range of possible interpretations, a number of uses, depending on the personal — and, as we will see, public — exigencies of the moment. In this way, Thoreau's theory of creative reading, like Emerson's, is in the end more radically subjective than that of

[15] Mott, "Education," 153.

Cornelius Felton and the Harvard classicists. Felton and his colleagues saw that the classics can be put to use for the purpose of self-cultivation and social reform. The transcendentalists saw the value of great books in much the same way, but they applied the ancient and modern classics, as well as world literature, history, and philosophy, to a wider range of personal and public issues.

Thoreau's "universal liturgy" applies ancient classics to the problem of antebellum American slavery. Great books cannot be macademized, as it were. Ancient authors are made new every time we approach them — and apply them — in the context of our own changing life and time. The ideas of ancient and modern classics are too vital — too rich and varied — to be deposited in some library, trapped inside a brick or marble structure, rather than read out-of-doors, so to speak, in the depths of a primitive forest, surrounded by lush vegetation. Nature invests Thoreau's reading of the ancient classics with creative energy in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, as we have seen. He builds this same kind of energy into the "Reading" chapter of Walden, for he depicts the process of observing nature and reading books as part of the same activity: the activity, that is, of becoming a student, an American scholar, a more deeply imaginative, rich and varied, contemplative citizen and self. It is in this sense that even a few words of an ancient language can be raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations. Their capacity to inspire — to suggest and provoke — is unlimited, like the mind of a heroic student itself. Reading the ancient Greek and Latin classics of Homer and Aeschylus, Thoreau says, "implies" that a heroic student "in some manner emulate their heroes." This is an act of sympathetic imagination — one that, in Thoreau's view, will make for more enlightened individuals and a more just American society.

Heroic books "will always be dead to degenerate times" (*W*, 403). A true scholar, like

Henry Thoreau and Cornelius Felton, "must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have" (*W*, 403). Again Thoreau is mouthing the words, reshaping the values, of Harvard classicism. He is applying his own theory in the text of *Walden*, allowing the words and ideas of other people to filter through his own thoughts and reform his own writing. Thoreau does so for his own purposes, making the ancient classics — and Harvard new humanism — his own. Emerson practiced the same style of active reception, as does Elizabeth Peabody, in her essay called "A Vision," as cited earlier. Such an enthusiastic soul leads onward — to conquer difficulties — to fulfill miracles, as Cornelius Felton puts it in "On Classical Learning." Accord to Felton and the American transcendentalists, a true scholar comes "closer to the heroic writers of antiquity" through careful and laborious study. This is their collective idea of liberal arts. Transcendentalism itself is a textual movement, in these terms, a new humanist educational endeavor. "Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies," Thoreau continues in his chapter on "Reading," "but the adventurous student will always study the classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a more noble exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (*W*, 403).

Thoreau's idea of liberal arts is grounded in classical studies but ranges widely, like the intellectual habit of Mrs. Ripley, who pursued higher learning "in mathematics, in natural

philosophy, in psychology, theology, as well as ancient and modern literature."[16] A heroic scholar devours all the world's "Classics, and still older and more than classic but less known Scriptures of the nations," Thoreau writes, indeed, all the "Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares" (*W*, 405). Thoreau presses classical college theory to the limits of his own voracious habit of heroic reading. This is why he says not to bother with "Little Reading" (*W*, 406). True scholarship is hard labor, "a noble exercise," an essential service to which the scholar's whole life is consecrated.

Thoreau's neighbors must devote their lives accordingly, Thoreau argues in his chapter on "Reading." "Explore and explore," Emerson urged his Dartmouth College audience in 1838. "Be neither chided not flattered out of your position of perpetual inquiry" (*LE*, 111). Thoreau takes American students to task as well. "A written word is the choicest of relics," he continues in his chapter on "Reading" (*W*, 404). "It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work nearest to life itself" (*W*, 404). Thoreau wants his Concord neighbors to read great books, including his own, with a renewed sense of personal and public urgency. "Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but to reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing" (*W*, 406).Thoreau insists that reading is a "high" moral activity, "not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to" (*W*, 406). It would be a mistake to dismiss Thoreau's classicism as elitist, or somehow too "high" minded. Thoreau's view of education and reading is more egalitarian than

[16] Goodwin, 2.

that. "We are under-bred and low-lived and illiterate," he fumes, "and in this respect I confess I do not make any very broad distinction between my townsmen who cannot read at all, and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects" (*W*, 408). Thoreau's words are meant to provoke. This passage and others like it have ("we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line") have been interpreted as advice about how to read the text of *Walden*.[17] Thoreau designed his own book "deliberately and reservedly," and he expects as much from his readers(*W*, 403). Thoreau's writing is full of "perpetual suggestions and provocations (*W*, 403). His theory of reading must be taken seriously, however, as Thoreau's advice about how best to approach all books — not just his own. Heroic reading must be cultivated throughout the long course of a lifetime. It is important to recognize that Thoreau is preaching to all his neighbors, especially the most educated among them, including Harvard professors who lived in greater Boston. "Indeed, there is hardly a professor in our colleges," Thoreau proclaims, "who, if he has mastered the difficulties of the language, has proportionally mastered the difficulties of the wit and poetry of a Greek poet, and has any sympathy to impart the alert and heroic reader; and as for the sacred Scriptures, or Bibles of mankind, who in this town can tell me even their titles?" (*W*, 408). Thoreau almost seems to point the finger at Cornelius Felton himself: *you* must enter more deeply, more philosophically, into the spirit of the classics, Thoreau implies. Only in this way will the narrow learning — and paltry views — of Harvard classicists become enlarged.

Thoreau's tone in his chapter on "Reading" is playful and goading, provoking and serious, at times even grave. He challenges Harvard classicists at their own higher learning

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[17] See especially Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*.

game. Even the professors need to cultivate more "sympathy" in order to become "alert and heroic reader[s]." The work of those who lay claim to liberal culture, those who fancy themselves creative readers, is far from complete. Thoreau inhabits the persona, and uses the language of Harvard classicism, as a way to turn the rhetoric of new humanists against them. He makes this move even more brilliantly in his essays and lectures surrounding the John Brown affair. "We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were," Thoreau writes in *Walden* (408). "We are a race of tit men, and soar little higher in our intellectual flights than the columns of the daily paper" (*W*, 408).

Thoreau concludes the third chapter of *Walden* with a plea for the value of soaring higher through public education. "The best books are not read even by those who are called good readers," he proclaims (*W*, 407). "What does our Concord culture amount to?" (*W*, 407). Thoreau says his neighbors, even those who are "college-bred and so called liberally educated," have "little or no acquaintance with the English classics," let alone "the ancient classics and Bibles" of the world (*W*, 407). Yet he still has hope. The following passage is surely advice about how best to read *Walden*, but Thoreau's words, at the same time, reflect the deep structural patterns of Harvard classicism. Thoreau's vision is a heightened form of romantic new humanist education theory:

> There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring of our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era of his life from the reading of a book. The book exists perchance which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life. Moreover, with wisdom we shall learn liberality. The solitary hired man on a farm on the outskirts of Concord, who has

> had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is driven as he believes into silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and, through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let 'our church' go by the board. (*W*, 408-9)

Thoreau's theory of reading is a form of antimaterialism, a refusal to live according to what he saw as the narrow, confining dictates of antebellum business culture. But his idea of education has broader application than that. We all must learn to read as writers, Thoreau implies: we must read with depth and emotion, imagination and creativity, like the great poets — not for the "paltry convenience" of keeping accounts or getting ahead in commerce or trade. Yet Thoreau's program for wide and eager reading proposes to entirely remake the moral and intellectual lives of Concord citizens. The "words" of great books speak "to our condition exactly," only "if we . . . really hear and understand them." Truly great works of literature will take us beyond the narrow circumstances in which we live, broadening our perspective, enlarging — and humanizing — our views. The potential for such activity is itself unutterable, not yet full realized — ready to be reimagined, put to work in the context of a newly redeemed personal and public life. Reading is like a conversation, which involves not just talking but close listening, and truly hearing a diversity of other voices. Reading — liberal education — is a way to engage ideas far distant from our own, a process that, when pursued with genuine openness and curiosity, helps us reform the world around us.

Like the Harvard new humanists, as well as "old" humanists in the Renaissance, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam and Sir Thomas More, Thoreau closely associates intellectual activity

with the practical and moral imperative to reform government and society. Thoreau's vision, in line with humanists both new and old, conceives education as a tool for human development that ultimately leads to a more rich and varied civic life. The conclusion of Thoreau's chapter on "Reading" drives home this perspective, and in this sense looks forward to his *political* theory of transcendental higher learning in 1859. In the wake of Harpers Ferry, Thoreau interpreted his neighbors' failure to sympathize with John Brown as a failure of higher learning, the result of Concord citizens' harness of mind and heart. Thoreau conceived John Brown as the most liberally educated American citizen in the mid-nineteenth century, because Brown stood up to defend "the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave power."[18] John Brown was the only one with a truly broad mind and open heart. Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton would not follow Thoreau in such an application of new humanist thought and values. Yet in works like Thomas More's *Utopia*, which was grounded in the humanism of Erasmus, eduction has everything to do with making communities better. Thomas More argues that all citizens must devote themselves to "the freedom and culture of the mind," for in such pursuit "lies the happiness" of personal and public "life."[19] Thoreau makes a similar argument in "Reading," though he has his eyes steadily on nineteenth-century American problems. Thoreau implies that books and authors open us up to new worlds of meaning, by which we can date new eras of our life and thought. New scenes of reading will lead all the while to higher levels of self-cultivation and social reform. In this sense "we shall learn liberality." Wide and eager reading will help us view our own world through the lens of a more open, generous, and purely

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[18] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 417.

[19] Qtd. in John M. Parrish, "Education, Erasmian Humanism, and More's *Utopia*," *Oxford Review of Education*, v. 36, no. 5 (October 2010): 599.

receptive mind. This is what it means, in Thoreau's account, to "humbly commune with Zoroaster," or to imbibe the spirit of Plato, Demosthenes, the Greek tragedians, Homer, or the modern English classics. Thoreau's vision of heroic reading rearticulates the most basic tenet of romantic humanism: "through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies," we transcend our own narrow place and time. We become part of something much bigger than ourselves, or in the words of William James, we learn to feel the "elation and freedom" that comes only "when outlines of the confining selfhood melt down."[20] Through higher learning we learn to "let 'our church'" — our own narrow views, our own prejudices and provinciality, "go by the board."

In *Walden* Thoreau appropriates the educational vision of new and old humanism, extending it in a way he would not fully realize until his public handling of the John Brown affair. Thoreau's theory of liberal education ultimately takes aim at the institution of slavery, the most glaring example of human injustice that he railed against in his time. "We boast that we belong to the nineteenth century and are making the most rapid strides of any nation," Thoreau writes, at the end of his chapter on "Reading" (*W*, 409). "But consider how little this village does for its own culture." Thoreau says "we should not be forever repeating our ab abs" (*W*, 406). "It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities," with leisure — if they are indeed so well off — to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives" (*W*, 409). In this statement Thoreau reflects back on one of the central themes in the opening chapters of *Walden*, a book in which he associates wide and eager reading, transcendental higher learning, with liberty — the freedom to lead a more intellectual and spiritual life, a more upright and moral existence, rather than conforming to the unjust laws and

[20] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1903) in Bruce Kuklick, ed., *William James: Writings, 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 250.

less than human principles that Thoreau believed plagued antebellum thought and society. In Thoreau's mature portrait, liberal education is a variety of nonconformism, a vehicle for social activism and tool for political protest. "Cannot students be boarded her and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord?" (*W*, 409). "Instead of noblemen," Thoreau exclaims, "let us have noble villages of men" (*W*, 410).

Yet "we are kept from school too long, and our education is sadly neglected" (*W*, 409). This is a grave human error, one with perilous public implications. Thoreau concludes his chapter on "Reading" with a new humanist flourish, a call for collective support for higher learning. The village of Concord "is rich enough," he says. "It wants only the magnanimity and refinement. It can spend money enough on such things as farmers and traders value, but it is thought utopian to propose spending money for things which more intelligent men know to be of far more worth" (*W*, 410). Thoreau's education philosophy is indeed utopian, taken as if from the pages of Renaissance humanists, and filtered through the ideas of Emerson and Cornelius Felton. Higher learning is"of far more worth" than most have realized (*W*, 410). It is truly gainful employment, because books and reading have the power to open us up, freeing us from the limitations of our place and time, so that we can see more clearly and not turn a blind eye on the moral challenges of the modern age. The time which we really improve is when we travel outside the boundaries of self, that is, when we try "to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own," as Andrew Delbanco puts it.[21]

Thoreau's chapter on "Reading" makes a plea for the liberating power of education. Humanism new and old has often been criticized as a form of social control, a way to preserve

[21] Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 3.

authority and keep the masses in place. This is not how Thoreau conceived transcendental higher learning. Thoreau's mature philosophy of education had more of the democratic individual in it.

Chapter Four

Thoreau's Universal Liturgy:

Ancient Classics and the John Brown Affair

To Thoreau democratic individualism relies on our capacity to speak out and fight the prevalence of human injustice that exists in the social world around us. This is what he achieved on December 2, 1859, when Thoreau stood up to read poetry and the ancient classics at John Brown's memorial service in Concord. Thoreau's political philosophy and educational theory merged in the wake of Harpers Ferry. His "universal liturgy," as Thoreau delivered it on the afternoon of December 2, deploys the progressive approach to books and learning that he worked out in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*.

Viewed in the context of his earlier work, Thoreau's performance at Concord Town Hall on December 2 sheds light on the question of his politics — a problem that has plagued Thoreau scholars for centuries. On one hand, there is a long tradition that interprets Thoreau's political philosophy as "false and bizarre."[1] In this tradition commentators have argued that Thoreau's theory of moral conscience is essentially private — and hence an "unpolitical" affair.[2] On the other hand, Stanley Cavell and his

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[1] The quotation is from Vincent Buranelli's influential essay "The Case Against Thoreau," *Ethics* 67, no. 4 (July 1957): 266. Qtd. in Turner, "Introduction: Thoreau as a Political Thinker," 1.

[2] Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience" (1970), in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 60. Qtd. in Turner, "Introduction: Thoreau as a Political Thinker," 2. See also John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 55-56 and Taylor Stoehr, *Nay-Saying in Concord: Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979). Stoehr characterizes the transcendentalists

followers have rejected the notion that Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience is essentially "privatistic" and apolitical. The act of writing itself, in Cavell's view, is a form of political resistance.[3] Publication is a form of direct "address," an activity that "distinguishe[s] public acts of civil disobedience from private acts of conscientious refusal," Jack Turner summarizes.[4] "Thoreau values and encourages acts that take a stand for moral right against immoral law and spark wonder in their audience at the powers of individual agency, especially moral agency," according to Turner. "Thoreau believed that in a democracy, what manner of selves we are ultimately determines the laws and policies we make. Self-formation is therefore a political activity, and our humdrum civic spaces — town halls, town squares, the free press — are politically most powerful when they are venues for performative conscientious expression and thus potential sites for self-reformation."[5]

Broadly speaking, these two perspectives do not take into consideration the progressive nature of Thoreau's *educational* vision. The scholarly tradition of denying

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as "monks sitting cross-legged on the floor" who "abstain entirely" from the politics of antislavery (19-20). In *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), Anne Rose writes that the "philosophical bent" of Emerson, Thoreau, and the Concord writers "ran against the grain of the most important development of the decade, antislavery politics" (219).

[3] See Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*.

[4] Turner, "Introduction: Thoreau as a Political Thinker," 2. Theorists who have followed Cavell in claiming a "positive" politics for Thoreau include George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially 87-89, 100-105; and Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Thoreau's Militant Conscience," *Political Theory* 9, no. 1 (February 1981): 81-110. Also see Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially chap. 5.

[5] Turner, "Thoreau and John Brown," 171.

Thoreau's "positive" politics rejects him as a political thinker altogether. And the Cavellian notion that Thoreau engages in political activity by way of his non-fiction writing does not fully situate Thoreau's literary engagement in the broader context of his evolving theory of books, reading, and "higher" education. Thoreau can best be understood as a political thinker if we conceive him as an education theorist. Especially toward the end of his life, Thoreau's theory and practice of higher learning *is* an expression of his countercultural politics. Thoreau's mature *political* philosophy of education has deep roots in the antimaterialism of Harvard classicists. But it looks forward, at the same time, to some of our own most ambitious plans for revitalizing the liberal arts and humanities in the twenty-first century as well.

By the time *Walden* was published in 1854, Thoreau viewed heroic and creative reading as a tool for the cultivation of a more broad-minded, open-hearted American citizenship. Public commitment to higher learning, in Thoreau's mature view, will lead to the establishment of social institutions that truly value "the variety and joys" of all human "life" (*W*, 330). This conviction only solidified in the wake of Harpers Ferry. Thoreau stood up to read poetry and the ancient classics at John Brown's memorial service because he conceived reading itself as a public, not just private act. He conceived education as a form of civic engagement. Thoreau seized Concord Town Hall on December 2 as a site for the performance of his own higher learning, a political activity that doubled as an expression of Thoreau's deep-seated moral and intellectual objection to the American institution of slavery. In doing so, Thoreau embraced Captain Brown — and rejected the more socially conservative Harvard classicists — as a model for transcendental higher learning.

Brown's example, in sum, helped Thoreau forge a newly radical philosophy of education and reading. Thoreau planned his "universal liturgy" as a literary protest, a symbolic assertion of "right" over "might" — if not a literal act of violence than a verbal attack, a fierce undercutting of dominant nineteenth- century cultural values. His literary practice of civil disobedience, or what Michael T. Gilmore calls Thoreau's "word-as-deed-activism," in this sense marks the height of the transcendentalists' liberation pedagogy.[6]

To understand the political nature of Thoreau's mature education philosophy, we can begin with his immediate response to Harpers Ferry. Two works — a lecture and an essay — help frame his dramatic reading of poetry and the classics at John Brown's memorial on December 2. Thoreau delivered the lecture we now know as "A Plea for Captain John Brown" at the First Parrish Meetinghouse in Concord on October 30, 1859.[7]

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[6] My own analysis in the following chapter is closest to Turner and Gilmore. In *The War on Words*, Gilmore argues that "Thoreau cedes to Brown the dual mission" of a heroic poet, namely, "to inspire with language as well as to act. At Harpers Ferry, despite the raid's ostensible failure," Gilmore theorizes, "Brown put into practice the war against slavery that he had conceptualized. His written and recorded statements [were] already functioning as decisive blows against the South's system of injustice. Thoreau, who endorses violence against slaveholders . . . , sees in Brown a consummation of the word-as-deed activism that defines the whole antebellum period" (73). Gilmore's thesis is that American romantic writers like Emerson and Thoreau "understood that their voicing was a form of acting" (8). Jack Turner agrees in his essay on "Thoreau and John Brown." Neither Turner nor Gilmore, however, associate Thoreau's "active" politics of public speech with his mature view of transcendental higher learning, which had roots in the civic-mindedness of Harvard new humanism.

[7] Brown was captured by federal forces led by Colonel Robert E. Lee on October 18. Thoreau first learned of Brown's capture the following day while visiting the home of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Originally titled "The Character and Actions of Capt. Brown," Thoreau' read the lecture we now know as "A Plea" in Concord on October 30 and repeated it in Boston at Tremont Temple, and again on November 3 at the Mechanic's Hall in Worcester. The lecture was published in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), a collection of antislavery writings edited by James Redpath,

He published "The Last Days of John Brown," an essay, in the *Liberator* on July 27, 1860.[8] Both works originate from journal entries Thoreau wrote in the weeks immediately following Captain Brown's raid. "A Plea" and "Last Days" view the problem of slavery, and Concord citizens' lack of sympathy for John Brown, as a failure of higher learning — a problem that must be addressed through renewed public commitment to liberal education.

Harvard classicists like Cornelius Felton, after all, may have been "liberal" on issues related to education, but they remained social conservatives, especially when it came to the problem of slavery. Felton himself was a proslavery advocate for most of his life. He was an opponent of antislavery activism. Felton quarreled with his close friend, Charles Sumner, over Sumner's increasingly radical views following the Compromise of 1850.[9] As Harvard President, a post Felton took up in 1860, Felton sternly rebuked Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for allowing his son to get mixed up with the abolitionist movement. Felton leveraged his position of authority at Harvard to scold students who became, in his view, far too outspoken. Felton and other Harvard Unitarians believed in

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along with a transcription of proceedings from the memorial service Thoreau helped plan for John Brown in Concord on December 2. Subsequent references to "A Plea for Captain John Brown" appear within my text and correspond with the Library of America edition of the lecture. See Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 396-417.

[8] "Last Days" appeared in print under its present title in *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1866). Thoreau wrote the essay for a commemoration at Brown's home in North Elba, New York on July 4, 1860. Thoreau was not able to attend this event, but his "Last Days" essay was read aloud by the ceremony's organizer. Subsequent references to "The Last Days of John Brown" appear within my text and correspond with the Library of America edition of the essay. See Henry David Thoreau, C*ollected Essays and Poems*, 422-428.

[9] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 13.

the virtue of law and order, alongside their advocacy of liberal learning as a tool for the cultivation of broad-minded, sympathetic American citizens.

Edward Everett, Emerson's favorite undergraduate professor, was also a social conservative. Six days after Thoreau delivered his "universal liturgy," publicly declaring support for John Brown and the politics of radical antislavery, Everett delivered a reactionary speech at Faneuil Hall in Boston. Everett's speech typifies the law-abiding classical college mindset. His speech firmly rejects John Brown's use of violence, imagining, in stark contrast to Thoreau, "the horrors that would have ensued had the tragedy on which the curtain rose at Harpers Ferry been acted out, through all its scenes of fire and sword, of lust and murder, of rapine and desolation, to the final catastrophe."[10] Everett compares Brown's raid to the history of slave rebellion in Haiti. "It was an attempt to do on a vast scale what was done in St. Domingo, in 1791, where the colored population was about equal to that of Virginia." Playing on the deepest fears of his white audience, Everett even alludes to acts of sodomy ("abominations not to be named by Christian lips, in the hearing of Christian ears"), which he falsely claims were committed by marauding slaves in the West Indies.[11]

Everett's speech wields the "language" of Harvard classicism as a form of social control. Everett uses the language of classical theater to threaten abolitionists, and strike fear into the mind of antebellum white culture. Harpers Ferry was a "tragedy," in Everett's account, and if "all its scenes" had been "acted out," the drama would have ended in "final catastrophe." Cornelius Felton's attempt to silence the political voice of

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[10] Redpath, 249.

[11] Redpath, 249.

Harvard students in 1860 functioned the same way. It was an attempt to control, not liberate, the mind of American scholars. Thoreau saw this as a dangerous inconsistency in the Harvard new humanist worldview, and he attacked the classical college for it.

He does so beginning in "A Plea." Thoreau does not take Everett or Felton to task by name. Instead he attacks the classical college mindset more broadly, rebuking Harvard new humanists, all "so called liberally educated men" whose views of education Thoreau admired, but whose social conservatism he detested (*W*, 407). True liberal education cannot exist in a society that supports the vile institution of slavery, a practice that Thoreau believed kept the whole nation in chains. Thoreau speaks out, using the language of Harvard classicism, as a way to fight back — a way to challenge those who hold positions of cultural and intellectual authority on their own supposedly new humanist grounds. He imagines a more socially progressive, politically activist form of higher learning — of which John Brown is representative. The Harvard classicists, in Thoreau's portrait, pale in comparison to the high principles of Captain Brown.

Brown lives his ideals and is willing to speak up — and fight — for them. He is a personification of "action from principle."[12] In "A Plea" Thoreau associates John Brown with a long tradition of revolutionary politics, reaching through the American Revolution to the Puritan revolt of Cromwell.[13] Brown's radical ideals exist in stark contrast with the dead letter of Harvard institutional values. Thoreau's John Brown has a certain life force, a kind of radical Protestant spirit and human vitality about him. His grandfather "was an

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[12] The quotation is from "Civil Disobedience." See Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 210. For the idea that Thoreau came to see John Brown as a personification of Thoreau's idea of "action from principle," see especially Jack Turner, "Thoreau and John Brown," 168 and passim; Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 63-70.

[13] See Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 14-28 and 179-205.

officer in the Revolution," Thoreau explains ("A Plea," 396). While traveling with his father, Captain Brown "saw a good deal of military life," yet from an early age he rejected the idea of launching a traditional military career ("A Plea," 396). As a young man John Brown "resolved that he would never have any thing to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty" ("A Plea," 396).[14]

Thoreau characterizes Brown's activity in Kansas as just such a battle for freedom. Indeed "it was through his agency, far more than any other's, that Kansas was made free" ("A Plea," 397). The operative words here are "agency," "liberty," and "free," terms that Thoreau builds upon later in "A Plea" and "Last Days." He strategically skips over the bloody details of John Brown's personal involvement with the execution-style massacre of five proslavery supporters in the Kansas Territory three years before Harpers Ferry.[15] Walter Harding writes that Thoreau must not have known about Brown's participation in the Pottawatomie bloodbath, which involved the brutal hacking to death with broadswords of five unarmed men, but David S. Reynolds has more recently argued that Thoreau must have known about Brown's crimes of murder in "Bleeding Kansas."[16] Although we will probably never know the extent to which Thoreau knew about, or believed, the gruesome details of Brown's violent action, there is

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[14] John Brown's father, Owen, sold beef and horses to the United States army during the War of 1812. Owen took his son along on trips to army campus, and young John Brown was so disgusted by "the profanity, disobedience, and mutinous talk of . . . soldiers," writes David S. Reynolds, that young John "vowed never to serve in the military." During the same period, when not yet a teenager, John Brown "befriended a slave boy his own age owned by the family he was lodging with. The boy was intelligent and benevolent. John rankled at the preferential treatment that he, as a white, received from the family." See Reynolds, 33.

[15] For the most detailed account of Brown's activity in Kansas, see Reynolds, 138-205.

[16] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 418. See Reynolds, 221-33.

no question that he cleaned up his portrait of Captain Brown. Thoreau interprets the radical abolitionist's actions at Harpers Ferry — saying nothing about events at Pottawatomie — as part of Brown's holy war against the institution of American slavery. Beginning in "A Plea," Thoreau supports violent action in a manner that goes well beyond his soldierly rhetoric in "Civil Disobedience."[17]

Freedom comes at a high cost, Thoreau implies. He admired John Brown because Brown gave his life for the liberty of other people. It may easily be argued that Thoreau cleans up the story of John Brown's violence too neatly. And if Thoreau was so deeply critical of antebellum cultural and intellectual elites for not taking action, why would he not have taken more direct antislavery action himself? Why did Thoreau limit himself to the use of verbal force and rhetorical violence, rather than committing himself to the physical resistance of American slave power?

One answer is that Thoreau did, in fact, resist federal law through his involvement with the Underground Railroad. In the "Visitors" chapter of Walden, Thoreau actually mentions his assistance to runaway slaves, and his family, especially on his mother's side, was actively involved in hiding escapes slaves. Thoreau helped one of John Brown's men escape to Canada, furthermore, in the wake of the Harpers Ferry raid.[18] Another possible answer, however, is that Thoreau actually saw his words — published and spoken — as the necessary extension of direct political action, indeed, a kind of

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[17] Despite the essay's reputation for passive resistance, "Civil Disobedience" is full of martial language. Thoreau says, for example, that "the State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest." See *Collected Essays and Lectures*, 217.

[18] Reynolds, 432.

literary and intellectual activism that extends anti-government resistance into a "higher" and more symbolic realm. Thoreau was following the example of Captain Brown in this sense as well. After he was captured, Brown's words reached a sweeping national audience through the free press, and Brown's unwavering antislavery rhetoric, along with his unshakable courage during his trial and execution, gained widespread respect even in the American South.[19] Thoreau saw that Brown's *words* were his most powerful weapon in the end. As Michael T. Gilmore and Jack Turner have argued, Thoreau viewed his own words as deeds.[20] He viewed public speaking, his own practice of creative reading and writing, as dynamically interrelated activities equivalent — and perhaps in the long term more effective — than some acts of physical violence.

To Thoreau, in other words, transcendental higher learning *was* an effective tool for active political resistance. Thoreau's mature view of what it means to be a public intellectual built on his "faith," as Linck C. Johnson has described it, "in the power of a text to transform the lives of readers and, consequently, to reform the institutions of society."[21] The educational nature of Thoreau's faith in the power of texts has not been sufficiently traced by scholars. Yet Thoreau's political conception of books and higher learning, in the form of creative reading and writing, gained strength throughout his life and work. "The performance of conscience before an audience," Jack Turner writes,

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[19] Reynolds, 334-369.

[20] See Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 60-74 and Turner, "Thoreau and John Brown."

[21] Johnson, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," 53. The term "public intellectual," as Lawrence Buell points out, did not come into being until the twentieth century. Buell paints Ralph Waldo Emerson as America's first public intellectual nonetheless. Toward the end of this chapter, I suggest that Thoreau, at least in 1859, more firmly grasps the political implications of public intellectualism. See Buell, *Emerson*, especially 39-43.

"transforms the invocation of conscience from a personally political act into a public political one. The aim of the performance is to provoke one's neighbors into a process of individual self-reform that will make them capable of proper vigilant democratic citizenship and conscientious political agitation."[22] *This* is the power of Thoreau's mature faith in texts, and it is both an educational and political concept. John Brown is a man whose actions matched his words, whose rhetoric carried real-world force. It changed the world. Thoreau says that Captain Brown always "had his eyes about him, and made many original observations" ("A Plea," 397). "It is a pity that he did not make a book" about them ("A Plea," 397).

Thoreau's John Brown is a man of thought and action, an American scholar — a would-be writer of books. The power of his human agency, Brown's ability to move and shape the world, throws into high relief the paltry influence of more well educated people around him. Thoreau's strategy is a clever one. When Captain Brown conducted his raid at Harpers Ferry, Cornelius Felton had reached the height of his academic career at Harvard. Felton would soon take up his position as President of the college, from 1860 to his death in 1862, a time during which Felton cracked down on the freedom of student speech. John Brown had very little formal education.[23] But Brown's wide-ranging activities, coupled with the simplicity of his words, the depth of his thought and actions, all seem to rise above the circle in which he moved — as if Brown's life were a conduit for higher principles, and his actions an expression of moral conscience and the strength

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[22] Turner, "Thoreau and John Brown," 155.

[23] Brown studied Greek and Latin for a very short time at a school in Plainfield, Massachusetts, run by Moses Hallock. Brown studied at the Morris Academy in Litchfield, Connecticut, as well. See Reynolds, 35.

of higher law. Brown's whole life seems driven by the authority of divine purpose, in Thoreau's portrait. He did not wait around for the universe to conform to his own vision of it. Captain Brown *made* things happen, and the world will continue to shape itself according to his singular activity and contributions.

Brown made things happen not just through his violent actions but also through the force of his free speech. Thoreau saw the value of such higher learning, and this point becomes more clear as the Concord writer builds up steam in "A Plea." Thoreau takes aim at newspaper editors, church-going Christians, the government and politicians in his lecture. He takes aim at all the nation's power brokers, in short, those who think they are liberally educated but fail, at the same time, to move and shape the world with anything like the authority of Captain John Brown. Thoreau implicitly points the finger at Harvard classicism, which viewed itself, as we have seen, as the educator of antebellum culture's ruling class. Yet a true thinking person, as Thoreau writes in *Walden*, has the power "to solve some of the problems of life, not theoretically, but practically" (*Walden*, 334). The Harvard humanists may have high hopes for liberal education and the study of ancient classics. They claimed higher learning could cultivate the minds and hearts of American citizens. The teaching and learning of Harvard classicists, however, seemed painfully ineffective to Thoreau in 1859. It is in this sense that Thoreau continues his call for liberal education under the skies of Concord through his engagement with the John Brown affair. Felton and the new humanists talked about the importance of projecting oneself "beyond the narrow circle in which we have moved" (*OCL*, 316). They believed wide and eager reading can enlarge our perspective, thus opening our eyes and teaching us a more upright — less narrow-minded — way to live.

But what way have the Harvard classicists thrown their own lives, pray? How could Felton and his Harvard colleagues be so liberally educated and deeply narrow-minded, both at the same time?

Thoreau's antislavery argument gains verbal force in "A Plea." He interprets Harpers Ferry through the lens of Harvard classicism as a direct affront to the most powerful, so-called liberally educated men in antebellum culture. Captain Brown, not the Harvard classicists, "had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong," ("A Plea" (397). Yet Brown

> did not go to the college called Harvard, good old Alma Mater as she is. He was not fed on the pap that is there furnished. As he phrased it, "I know no more of grammar than one of your calves." But he went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were *his humanities*, and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man. ("A Plea," 397-98)

Thoreau's portrait of John Brown as a student of the "*humanities*" is meant to be shocking. Whether or not he knew and believed the story of Brown's murderous activity in "Bleeding Kansas," Thoreau's portrait of Brown is a stunning reversal. Captain Brown commenced not the slaughter of five human beings in Kansas. He "commenced the public practice of *humanity*." Thoreau portrays John Brown as a hero who saved lives, not a murderer who took them.

Thoreau's depiction is strategic. It is a form of verbal and rhetorical warfare, one that talks back to authority by refusing their portrait of John Brown as a criminal, a traitor, a maniac — in Edward Everett's portrait, a potential rapist who aimed to lead the most destructive kind of slave rebellion. Thoreau's John Brown is a man of more sacred

principles. Sometimes it is necessary to defend America's founding values — our own liberty and humanism — by all means necessary. Thoreau says as much in "Civil Disobedience." He makes the same basic point in "A Plea," though with more militant countercultural rhetoric. Who will stand up and fight for freedom? Will the Harvard new humanists, indeed, will all so called liberally educated men, stand up and fight for the principles of their own liberal culture, including the basic human dignity of even the most vulnerable "falling man"? Compared to John Brown, what have the Harvard classicists actually accomplished? What can Harvard new humanism actually achieve? As a graduating college senior, as we have seen, Thoreau argued that nineteenth-century Americans must learn to "lead a more intellectual and spiritual life."[24] And Thoreau's only two book-length works, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, can be read as an extension of new humanist education theory. By 1859 Thoreau was ready to teach his own lesson. His handling of the John Brown affair challenges the moral and intellectual authority of Harvard classicism. His plea for John Brown calls new humanism out on the carpet and pulls the rug out from under the Harvard classicists all at the same time.

It is the classical college mindset — not the name of Cornelius Felton — that Thoreau challenges. It was John Brown who put his "*humanities*" to work in the world. Higher learning has the power to liberate the self, according to classical college theory. But only John Brown, one man among many, broke free from the narrow limits of his place and time. Brown carried his high ideas and moral principles to their practical end. What is a higher accomplishment, a more noble goal, than to "protect the weak and

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[24] See my discussion of Thoreau's 1837 Harvard graduation speech, "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times," in chapter one above.

dispense justice" ("A Plea," 411)? Brown stood up to defend those who were most vulnerable in antebellum society. Toward the end of "A Plea," in fact, Thoreau cites the words of Captain Brown directly. "I want you to understand that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave power, just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful," according to Thoreau's John Brown ("A Plea," 417). Unlike so many leading antebellum American citizens, Captain Brown lifted himself above "this self-indulging age" (*OCL*, 318). It is in this sense that Brown is a "man of action," in Thoreau's terms, "a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles, — that is what distinguished him" ("A Plea," 399). "I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them," Thoreau cites Brown further, and "that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit" ("A Plea," 417).

Thoreau implies there is no more human — no more humanist — proclamation than Captain Brown's. "It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you," Brown continues ("A Plea," 417). Everyone is "precious in the sight of God" ("A Plea," 417). Brown is no murderer of five unarmed men, in other words: he is a hero who speaks truth to authority. Such a radical abolitionist talks back to those in power and actively organizes against them. Brown's "sympathy" is "with the oppressed" ("A Plea, 417). "Such were *his humanities*" ("A Plea," 398).

We will see how Thoreau put a similar model to work at Concord Town Hall on the day of John Brown's execution. His "universal liturgy," Thoreau's sacralization of John Brown's "character" and "actions," he believed, would wake Concord neighbors up to the reality of gross injustice that exists in the world around them. According to the

Harvard humanists, higher learning can be blocked by pride. Wide and eager reading can be narrowed by self-interest and made small by human prejudice. This was a core teaching of Harvard classicism. Cornelius Felton argued that a heroic reader, a true American scholar "must forget his country, his prejudices, his superior light, and place himself upon a level with the intellect whose labors he essays to comprehend" (*OCL*, 315). Yet Felton and his colleagues could not forget their prejudices when it came to confronting the problem of slavery. Their idea of classical learning was in one sense broad-minded, at times even cosmopolitan — open to imbibing the "spirit" of distant peoples and cultures, that is, capable of "imag[ining] experience from perspectives other than one's own," as Andrew Delbanco describes the Harvard new humanist ethic in a twenty-first century context.[25] Antebellum humanists helped forge a more imaginative approach to the study of Greek and Latin classics. Their method helped seed the rise of humanities education in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States.[26] But these same Harvard humanists failed miserably, in Thoreau's eyes, when they failed to confront the problem of slavery through the lens of their own self-proclaimed moral openness and intellectual generosity.

Thoreau realized that liberal education was not living up to his own high valuation of it in 1859. This does not mean that Thoreau viewed his own classical college education as something to be forgotten, or that Thoreau somehow failed to internalize — and make dynamic use of — Harvard new humanism. Thoreau valued the culture of classicism so deeply, rather, that he wanted it live up to his own progressive

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[25] Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, 3. Also see my discussion of Delbanco in this chapter below — and in my introduction.

[26] Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 44-117.

politics. Thoreau recognized the usefulness of ancient classics and liberal education as a cultural discourse — a way of thinking and set of ideals that holds tremendous personal and public value. Harvard humanism is worth preserving, in Thoreau's mature view, for truly great books and authors are not just the province of intellectual elites.

Anyone complicit with the institution of slavery cannot possibly be broad-minded, in other words. Thoreau refused to concede books and learning to those who could not live up to his own high valuation of each individual's potential. "Our foes are in our midst and all about us," he proclaims in "A Plea" (403). "There is hardly a house but is divided against itself, for our foe is the all but universal woodenness of both head and heart, the want of vitality in man, which is the effect of our vice" ("A Plea," 403). Liberal education cannot be kept in chains, given over to social conservatives who advocate the opposite of human liberty. Dominant culture is in the wrong. Intellectual elites may think they are new humanists, but their lack of higher learning, their inability to educate independent, sympathetic-minded citizens, has "begotten fear, superstition, bigotry, persecution, and slavery of all kinds. We are mere figure-heads upon a hulk," Thoreau concludes, "with livers in the place of hearts" ("A Plea," 403).

Thoreau extends this same basic message in "The Last Days of John Brown." "We seem to have forgotten that the expression, a *liberal* education, originally meant among the Romans one worthy of *free* men," he writes ("Last Days," 426). In the ancient world "the learning of trades and professions by which to get your livelihood merely, was considered worthy of *slaves* only. But taking a hint from the word, I would go a step further and say, that it is not the man of wealth and leisure simply, though devoted to art, or science, or literature, who, in a true sense, is *liberally* educated, but only the earnest

and *free* man" ("Last Days," 426-27). Thoreau was indeed taking liberal education several steps further than the Harvard new humanists would allow. His liberation pedagogy conceives higher learning as a vehicle for the cultivation of democratic individuals, those who refuse, as Thoreau says in "Civil Disobedience," to stand on the shoulders of another man's liberty. Higher education is *for* freedom, in Thoreau's portrait, but the Harvard classicists cannot even get up out of their own distinguished chairs. "The modern Christian is a man who has consented to say all the prayers of the liturgy," Thoreau writes in "A Plea," provided you will let him go straight to bed and sleep quietly afterward" (403). So too with the Harvard humanists. Thoreau could not sleep after he heard about Harpers Ferry. He was in a state of moral and intellectual panic. He treated his neighbors' refusal to sympathize with John Brown, in this sense, as a problem that could be corrected thought higher learning. "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust," Thoreau writes in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden* (334). In his portrait, Captain Brown emerges as the only true practitioner of liberal education, the only earnest and truly *free* man.

Thoreau's pun on the Latin term for "freeman" highlights his core conviction that the goal of liberal learning is to uphold a vision of freedom proportionate to the dignity of all human beings. His vision of higher learning in 1859 reaches back to his youthful definition of education, as Thoreau articulates it in a letter to Orestes Brownson in 1837. "We should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and should learn of, as well as with him, if we would be most helpful," Thoreau wrote while still a Harvard undergraduate.

"But I am not blind to the difficulties of the case; it supposes a degree of freedom which rarely exists. It hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive the full import of that word — Freedom — not a paltry Republican freedom, with a *posse comitatus* at his heels to administer in doses as to a sick child — but a freedom proportionate to the dignity of his nature — a freedom that shall make him feel that he is a man among men, and responsible only to that Reason of which he is a particle, for his thoughts and his actions."[27] Thoreau's letter to Brownson anticipates his portrait of John Brown as a model for transcendental higher learning. Captain Brown had it in his heart to conceive the full import of the word "freedom." His words matched his deeds and lived up to "a freedom proportionate to the dignity of his own nature."

"Last Days" drives home this connection. Thoreau's defense of John Brown is part of his evolving — and political — theory of transcendental higher learning. "In a slaveholding country like this," Thoreau concludes in his "Last Days" essay, "there can be no such thing as a *liberal* education" (427). No one is free or broad-minded as long as slavery is tolerated. John Brown must be the closest thing to "*liberally* educated." His thoughts and actions are responsible only to that pure form of "Reason," the higher law Thoreau and the Concord writers believed shaped all that is right and just in the world. "Look not to legislatures and churches for your guidance," Thoreau proclaims ("Last Days," 426). Look not "to any soulless, *incorporated* bodies, but to *inspirited* or inspired ones" ("Last Days," 426). This line calls up images of Harvard's governing body, the Harvard Corporation, which Thoreau implies is spiritless — dead to the revolutionary nature of the times. Thoreau's words strike at the authority of institutional Harvard.

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[27] *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1958), 20.

John Brown emerges as the more heroic teacher, one who "produced marked changes" in the minds and hearts of people in New England ("Last Days," 423). Thoreau's John Brown teaches us how to be more independent, sympathetic, and ethically-engaged American citizens. Brown's principled thought, heroic actions, and strong words are instructional. Under the tutelage of John Brown, "The North, I mean the living North, suddenly all transcendental," Thoreau writes ("Last Days," 423). "All whose moral sense had been aroused, who had a calling on high to preach, sided with him. What confessions he extracted from the cold and conservative!" ("Last Days," 423). Thoreau's John Brown is a heroic American scholar, whose example inspired "a more intelligent and generous spirit than that which actuated our forefathers" ("Last Days," 423-24). Brown created "the possibility, in the course of ages, of a revolution in behalf of another and an oppressed people" ("Last Days," 424). Thoreau embraces the transformative power of John Brown's liberation pedagogy. "What avail all your scholarly accomplishments and learning, compared with . . . [John Brown's] wisdom and manhood," Thoreau continues, in one of the most striking passage from the "Last Days" essay (424). "To omit his other behavior, see what a work this comparatively unread and unlettered man wrote within six weeks. Where is our professor of *belles lettres* or of logic and rhetoric, who can write so well?" ("Last Days," 424).

Brown's "other behavior" is political violence. Thoreau implies that Brown's rhetoric — his words — are just as dangerous. "Literary gentlemen, editors and critics, think they know how to write, because they have studied grammar and rhetoric: but they are egregiously mistaken," Thoreau bellows ("Last Days," 426). "The art of composition is as simple as the discharge of a bullet from a rifle, and its master-pieces imply an

infinitely greater force behind them" ("Last Days, 426).

In this remark Thoreau comes closest to articulating the theory behind his reading of Tacitus at John Brown's memorial service on December 2, 1859. Thoreau's "universal liturgy," the entire service he planned and delivered at Concord Town Hall, was itself an artful — and dangerous — composition. It was a political act, a public performance, a literary form of resistance to authority — one that had long range and revolutionary force behind it. "Books, not which afford us cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring, such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions, such I call good books," Thoreau declared in 1849, with the publication of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (78). In "A Plea" and "Last Days," Thoreau's rhetoric affords no "cowering enjoyment." Taking up John Brown as a model, Thoreau's words cut with a sharp knife's edge.

It is in this sense that Brown replaces the Harvard humanists, in Thoreau's imagination, as a model for transcendental higher learning. Thoreau saw Captain Brown as no "timid" or "idle" kind of American scholar. The Harvard classicists pale in comparison. Brown's words have a sharp countercultural edge. Thoreau embraces the radical abolitionist "*his humanities*" as a model for the transcendentalists' own activist practice of the liberal arts. In Brown's "case there is not idle eloquence," Thoreau lectures in "A Plea" (408). There is "no made or maiden speech, no compliments to the oppressor. Truth is his inspirer, and earnestness the polisher of his sentences" ("A Plea," 408). Brown "could" even "afford to lose his Sharpe's rifle, while he retains his faculty of speech" ("A Plea," 408-09). For Brown's words are like "a Sharpe's rifle of infinitely

surer and longer range" ("A Plea," 409).

The classical college mindset had no room for Captain John Brown — and no tolerance for Thoreau's increasingly progressive politics. Thoreau embraced Brown, "a comparatively unread and unlettered man," as a model for transcendental higher learning nonetheless. Thoreau's rhetorical strategy does not mean that he performed anything like violent action himself. But his handling of the John Brown affair, especially Thoreau's reading of poetry and the classics at Concord Town Hall on December 2, was an effective form of political resistance, a variety of civil and literary disobedience.

Thoreau had enemies lined up in the street against him. One group of angry citizens threatened to fire minute-guns as a counterdemonstration on December 2, if Thoreau went ahead with his plan to ring the Concord town bell at the moment of John Brown's execution in Virginia. Another group burned Brown in effigy, just hours after Thoreau delivered his "universal liturgy," a simultaneous celebration of John Brown's life and protest against the government that killed him. Captain Brown was tried and executed by the state of Virginia, though his crime was committed on federal property at Harpers Ferry. Thoreau immediately saw the national significance of the event. All Americans were complicit with the public persecution and political murder of John Brown, in Thoreau's view. Tension remained high in the days and weeks following events at Harpers Ferry, as the United States reached the height of sectional crisis. Concord officials refused Thoreau's request to ring the town bell on the afternoon of December 2. Thoreau threatened to do so anyway. The transcendentalists decided not to press the issue. Bronson Alcott "argu[ed] that it was more appropriate to signify their

sorrow in subdued and silent tones rather than by 'any clamor of steeples and the awakening of angry feelings,'" writes Walter Harding. "It was also decided to have a simple memorial service rather than any inflammatory speeches."[28]

A closer look reveals that Thoreau's opening speech was anything but simple. His "universal liturgy" was meant to "force the issue," if not awaken "angry feelings" then provoke a more upright and intellectually courageous response to John Brown and the problem of American slavery. On December 2 Thoreau deployed a strategy similar to his approach in "A Plea" and "Last Days." He attacked all "so-called liberally educated men" by deploying the Harvard new humanists' own language of ancient classics and higher education. Thoreau takes his neighbors to task, reproaching them for their astonishing lack of moral and intellectual "vitality" ("A Plea," 403). He presents John Brown as a man of more noble thoughts and far-reaching actions. Thoreau's reading of poetry and the classics at Concord Town Hall in this sense marks the height of his mature education philosophy. Thoreau's "universal liturgy" aims to wake his neighbors up into a heightened state of public intellectual activity, establishing a paradigm for the use of great books as a vehicle for the cultivation of "critical citizenship."[29]

If John Brown had his humanities, so did the Concord writers. Thoreau deployed his words as a weapon on December 2. He deployed his higher learning — his creative reading, writing, and public speaking — with renewed countercultural energy and force. Thoreau's earnest and polished sentences, fortified by the ancient classics, launch his

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[28] Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 420-21.

[29] Turner, Thoreau and John Brown," 156.

literary and political offensive. "So universal and widely related is any transcendent moral greatness," Thoreau begins, addressing a tense audience at Concord Town Hall, and "so nearly identical with greatness every where and in every age, as a pyramid contracts the nearer you approach its apex — that, when I now look over my commonplace book of poetry, I find that the best of it is oftenest applicable, in part or wholly, to the case of Captain Brown" ("Martyrdom," 418). Thoreau begins, in short, by defining his theory of books and reading. As he says in A Week, the best of books "make us dangerous to existing institutions" (78):

> Only what is true, and strong, and solemnly earnest will recommend itself to our mood at this time. Almost any noble verse may be read, either as . . . [John Brown's] elegy, or eulogy, or be made the text of an oration on him. Indeed, such are now discerned to be the parts of a universal liturgy, applicable to those rare cases of heroes and martyrs for which the ritual of no church has provided. This is the formula established on high, — their burial service — to which every great genius has contributed its stanza or line.[30]

Thoreau launches into his first reading, a passage from Andrew Marvell's poem "Tom May's Death." In its original context, this verse satire is a savage attack on the poem's eponymous Cromwellian, Tom May, a court writer turned Parliamentarian polemicist. Readers have interpreted "Tom May's Death" as evidence of Marvell's lingering "royalist sentiment."[31]

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[30] A transcript of the December 2 memorial service for John Brown was first published under the title "Services in Concord" in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, ed. James Redpath, 437-54. Thoreau's opening remarks begin on page 439 of this edition. Thoreau's speech on December 2 appears, without the rest of the funeral proceedings, under the title "Martyrdom of John Brown," in Henry David Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 418-421. Subsequent citations will appear within the body of my text and page numbers will correspond to the Library of America edition of Thoreau's speech.

[31] "Andrew Marvell," *Poetry Foundation*, accessed June 10, 2015, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/andrew-marvell. For a summary of the key issues

In Thoreau's hands, however, the following lines become transformed:

> When the sword glitters o'er the judge's head,
> And fear has coward churchman silenced,
> Then is the poet's time; 'tis then he draws,
> And single fights forsaken virtue's cause;
> He, when the wheel of empire whirleth back,
> And though the world's disjointed axle crack,
> Sings still of ancient rights and better times,
> Seeks suffering good, arraigns successful crimes. ("Martyrdom," 418)

Thoreau's reading emphasizes not counter-revolutionary energy but full-throated support for John Brown, reincarnated Puritan rebel. Marvell's poem sharply criticizes May, mouthpiece of the Long Parliament, as "Malignant Poet and Historian both."[32] Readers have interpreted the satire as evidence of Marvell's wavering support for the violent reform measures led by Cromwell. We have seen how Thoreau rejected the Church of England liturgy in mid-November 1859, as he planned John Brown's memorial service as a protest ceremony to be held at Concord Town Hall the following month. King Charles the First, Thoreau complains in his journal, is the only model offered by the institutional Church.[33] In the same vein, his reading of Marvell on December 2 rejects any hint of nostalgia for the "ancient right" of kings, implying Thoreau's support, instead, for active

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involved, and the complex question of Marvell's politics, see Nicholas McDowell, "Marvell Among the Cavaliers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 253-71.

[32] *Andrew Marvell, The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Dunno (1972; repr., New York: Penguin, 1996), 59.

[33] "I looked into the Church of England liturgy, printed near the beginning of the last century, to find a service applicable to the case of Captain Brown," Thoreau muses in his journal on November 18, 1859. "The only martyr recognized and provided for by it was King Charles the First!! Of all the inhabitants of England and of the world, he was the only one whom that church made a martyr and saint of!! And now for more than half a century it had celebrated his martyrdom by an annual service! What a satire on the church is that!" (*JXII*, 448-49).

subversion of government authority. Thoreau characterizes John Brown in "A Plea" as a radical Puritan revolutionary, certainly not a figure inclined to sympathy with royal — or, as we will see, imperialist — ideology. As a group the transcendentalists painted Captain Brown as an antebellum Oliver Cromwell.[34] John Brown "died lately in the time of Cromwell," Thoreau proclaims, but he reappeared here" ("A Plea," 398). Brown's severe public criticism of slavery seemed to Thoreau "like the speeches of Cromwell compared with those of an ordinary king" ("A Plea," 399). In his reading of Marvell Thoreau appropriates the lines of "Tom May's Death" strategically out of context, so to speak, in order to establish his own radical anti-government stance. If Marvell's poem criticizes Tom May, the Parliamentarian, painting him as "Malignant Poet and Historian both," then Thoreau inverts the poem's meaning, reworking Marvell's lines for Thoreau's own anti-authoritarian purposes.

Thoreau was no court-appointed poet. He was not inclined to fall in line with any kind of party line or "royalist" edict. Much like Captain Brown, Thoreau refused to kneel down, in thrall to the reign of dominant antebellum cultural and political authorities. In Marvell's poem, the lines from "Tom May's Death" read aloud by Thoreau are in fact uttered by the presiding spirit of Ben Jonson, king of Cavalier poets. Thoreau's voicing of these lines changes their meaning. Poetry stands not as the product of royal patronage but as a weapon to fight *against* the power and influence of centralized government. In Thoreau's usage, "ancient rights" become not those associate with absolute monarchy. They reflect the sacred right of performing individual conscience and protest against the state.

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[34] See Reynolds, 14-28 and 179-205.

Thoreau's creative reading, and public utterance, stand as a sword — a verbal weapon glittering over John Brown's judge. The Concord writer's reading of Marvell cuts, in other words, with a countercultural edge. *Now* is the poet's time: by making Marvell's lines his own, Thoreau serves up a threat to antebellum cultural and intellectual authorities. He challenges all those who submit to the royal command of a government ruled by the slave power. In this sense Thoreau's reading, placed at the beginning of John Brown's memorial service in Concord, sets the tone for the entire day's literary protest event. Thoreau's creative reading is a form of political engagement. He assumes the role of heroic scholar-poet himself. Thoreau's "saying" is a form of "doing."[35] His universal liturgy announces, from the beginning, that he will "arraign the crimes" of the most powerful American citizens around him.

Thoreau's creative reading refuses to submit to authority. This is what makes great books dangerous to existing institutions. Thoreau changes the meaning of Marvell's poem, putting it to work for his own radical abolitionist purposes. Such are *his* humanities. Like Emerson, Thoreau would have all creative readers do their own quarrying. This is what it means to be an American scholar, namely, one who refuses to passively accept the dictates of the past or tradition — but engages human culture actively, applying its greatest works accordingly. Thoreau sets up his "universal liturgy" as an act of resistance, certainly not a cog in the wheel of American empire. His mature view of education asserts the power of creative reading as a vehicle for the individual assertion of right over might, a way of declaring moral and intellectual — as well as political — independence.

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[35] See Gilmore, *The War on Word*s, 55 and passim.

Thoreau's "universal liturgy" begins with a reference to British royal authority, in other words, and concludes with a reference to Roman imperial power. Thoreau read passages from several other modern poets at Concord Town Hall on December 2, as noted earlier. But he saved his Latin learning for last. Thoreau wrapped up his introductory remarks at John Brown's memorial service by reading a passage from Tacitus's narrative life of Agricola.

Agricola was a well-connected member of the ruling military and political class in ancient Rome. He was a colonial administrator at a time very near the height of Roman imperial expansion and conquest. Agricola was very much a cog in the wheel of Roman empire. By invoking Tacitus's narrative life of such an ancient general and statesman, Thoreau performs a reversal not unlike his use of Marvell's poetry. Thoreau imagines John Brown in place of Agricola — situating the radical abolitionist, by implication, at the very height of cultural power. Captain John Brown, who challenged the authority of mainstream American culture and was swiftly disciplined, and punished with his life for it, now appears — in Thoreau's reading — on the highest possible ground. The Latin lines Thoreau read at Concord Town Hall are from the conclusion of Tacitus's life of Agricola. In its original context, the passage doubles as a funeral elegy, Tacitus's eulogy in praise of the Roman general and statesman, who was in fact the Latin historian's father-in-law. The passage read by Thoreau was often recited at funeral services during the early nineteenth century. In Thoreau's hands, the original Latin takes on radically new meaning.

Thoreau cites the lines of Tacitus not as an admirer of Roman imperial administration, but as part of his ongoing attempt to challenge the imperial march of

American slave power. Thoreau's strategy, again, is one of verbal attack — a thrilling reversal or creative reading of the original text. His transcendental Tacitus forms the cornerstone of Thoreau's universal liturgy. In many ways it was the foundation upon which John Brown's memorial service in Concord was built. "You, Agricola, we now congratulate," Thoreau began on December 2. "You are blessed," he continued, speaking in the "language" of ancient classics,

> not only because your life was a career of glory, but because you were released when it was a happiness to die. You met your fate with calm serenity. We have lost a parent, and we suffer that it was not in our power to gaze upon you with earnest affection, and see your expiring glance. Your dying words would have been ever dear to us. Your commands we should have treasured, and graved them in our hearts. Few tears bedewed thy cold remains and, in the parting moment, your eyes looked up for other objects, — but they looked in vain, and closed forever. If, in another world, there is a pious mansion for the blessed; if, as the wisest men have thought, the soul is not extinguished with the body, — you shall enjoy a state of eternal felicity. From that station behold your disconsolate family. Exalt our minds from unavailing grief to the contemplation of your virtues. Those we must not lament: it were impiety to sully them with a tear. To cherish their memory, to embalm them with our praises, and, if our frail condition will permit, to emulate your bright example will be the truest mark of our respect, the best tribute your family can offer. By dwelling on your words and actions, they will have an illustrious character before their eyes, and, not content with the bare image of your mortal frame, they will have what is more valuable, the form and features of your mind. I do not mean to censure the custom of preserving in brass and marble the shape and stature of eminent men, but busts and statues, like their originals, are frail and perishable. The form of the soul is eternal, and we can retain and express that, not by a foreign material and art, but by our own virtues. All of Agricola that gained our love and raised our admiration, still subsists, and will ever subsist, preserved in the minds of men, the register of ages, and the records of fame.[36]

These lines, as Thoreau read them on December 2, were almost certainly translated by

[36] Qtd. in Glick, "Thoreau Rejects an Emerson Text," 215-16.

Ralph Waldo Emerson.[37] When it came time to publish proceedings from the memorial service, Thoreau revised Emerson's translation, making it a sharper literary and political performance. For now, suffice it to say that Emerson's translation bristles with oppositional energy of its own. We will see how Thoreau's revision in fact surpasses Emerson's work, but for now it is worth recognizing that Emerson's translation, read aloud by Thoreau, embraces John Brown as part of the family, "a parent" even, a father whose "dying words would have been ever dear to us." Thoreau's words, uttered amidst threats of violent counterdemonstration, were anything if not provocation. In the original Latin context, Tacitus wrote his eulogistic lines as part of a larger narrative that celebrates, at least in part, the life of his deceased father-in-law. Thoreau's reading imagines John Brown in Agricola's place. Captain Brown was certainly not a government official, or administrative henchman, but rather a revolutionary citizen executed for high treason. Thoreau's reading in this sense forces the issue, challenging all those in antebellum circles of power who failed to see Brown as a hero. Many of Thoreau's neighbors sorely rejected Brown, calling him "a dangerous man," one who "is undoubtedly insane" ("A Plea," 402). Many Concord citizens, Thoreau fumed in his journal, "speak disparagingly of Brown because he resorted to violence, resisted the government, threw his life away" (*JXII*, 401-02). Yet what way have such men thrown their own lives, pray? Thoreau rejects the meek-hearted and narrow-minded response of Concord's "craven-hearted" citizens, those who count Captain Brown a traitor, a criminal, and then go about their way — dead to the higher law of antislavery ("A Plea," 402). John Brown's life was a model of active resistance to authority, Thoreau

[37] See Glick, "Thoreau Rejects an Emerson Text," 213-15.

proclaims, and this is the only true way to live.[38]

Thoreau finds a great deal of vitality in the death of Captain Brown, because Brown refused to follow anything but his own highest purpose while still living. He was the only one fully awake, for John Brown led a life, in Thoreau's portrait, devoted to the transformative power of "pure Reason." Thoreau's John Brown in this sense personifies the height of higher learning, for he lived a life of independence, magnanimity, simplicity, and trust. Brown refused to stand on the shoulders of another man's liberty. He stood up to speak truth to power, like any true American scholar. "The only thing in the world, of value, is the active soul," Emerson proclaims in his 1837 Harvard Phi Beta Kappa address (*AS*, 57). Brown converted life into truth through his heroic thought and actions. He practiced his principles. Thoreau certainly bronzed over the inhuman violence of Brown's activity in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry. But Thoreau's sacralization of Brown at the same time conceives Brown as somehow above criticism. Thoreau imagines John Brown as a vital contributing "family" member, a father-in-law, so to speak, to us all.

This is revolutionary rhetoric, meant to provoke. It is Emerson's work, read aloud by Thoreau. In the original Latin, Tacitus embraces his father-in-law as an authority figure, the administrative head of an important Roman family with high-flown military and political ties. Thoreau's reading hails John Brown, the radical abolitionist, as antebellum America's Agricola — implicitly embracing Brown as the head and heart of

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[38] "It seems as if no man had ever died before," Thoreau lectures in "A Plea," "for in order to die you must first have lived. I don't believe in the hearses, and palls, and funerals that they have had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; hey merely rotted or sloughed off, pretty much as they rotted and sloughed off all along" (414).

our very own modern American citizen-family. We should listen closely and follow Captain Brown's example. Thoreau is of course asserting his own moral and intellectual authority in his reading of Tacitus as well. Thoreau challenges antebellum elites at their own higher learning game. His praise of Captain John Brown speaks the language of Harvard classicism but applies it in a way most new humanists would have dreamed. Most abolitionists, let alone proslavery advocates, classical scholars, and other social conservatives, rejected Brown's use of violence as a means to overcome slavery. Thoreau fully embraces Captain Brown, arguing in effect that Brown was the most human — and humanist — among us.

As David S. Reynolds has explained, Thoreau and the transcendentalists *theorized* Brown's use of violence.[39] They supported his anarchy. Thoreau's reading of poetry and the classics on December 2 has not been sufficiently recognized for the central role it played in this process. Yet Thoreau's transcendental Tacitus captures the literary nature of his battle against slavery. In this sense his universal liturgy can be interpreted as the height of Thoreau's progressive approach to books and learning. At Concord Town Hall on December 2, Thoreau read Tacitus on in praise of the nation's most radical abolitionist thinker, one who was charged with treason, a man executed by the state of Virginia and viewed by many as the worst kind of criminal, one of those "deluded fanatics" hell-bent on breaking up the Union (*JXII*, 407). *This* man's "dying words would have been dear to us," Thoreau proclaims at Concord Town Hall. It is *this* man "we may now congratulate." Captain Brown is "blessed" and his "career" is full "of glory," in Thoreau's account. To "emulate" Brown's "bright example will be the truest mark of our

[39] Reynolds, 227.

respect." Thoreau advocates nothing less than violent revolution. "By dwelling on" Brown's "words and deeds," the "family" of such a radical abolitionist — indeed all American citizens — "will have an illustrious character before their eyes." We must throw our lives the way of Captain Brown, whose character and actions teach us how to be more active, engaged, sympathetic and independent citizens. In these terms Brown stands out as a model new humanist. Captain Brown is a true philosopher, scholar, and poet, "a transcendentalist above all" ("A Plea," 399).

Thoreau's reading paints John Brown as a founding "father," in short, a representative man — "the register of ages." Thoreau embraces Brown as the head of our own human family, but at the same time raises him up to the status of divinity. At times Thoreau's reading seems ready-made for transcendentalist philosophy. Captain Brown, American Agricola, "shall enjoy a state of eternal felicity," Thoreau proclaims: he will live forevermore in "a pious mansion for the blessed" because "the soul," as we all know, "is not extinguished from the body." Brown emerges not just as "a transcendentalist" in his own right but as the most representative American citizen of us all. As a representative man, Captain Brown lays claim to the god-like status that slumbers within all humans.[40] If he emerges as a modern-day saint and martyr, an American Agricola, in Thoreau's portrait, however, then John Brown is at the same time better than the ancient Roman statesman. He is certainly a more admirable figure than King Charles the First. "The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims," Thoreau lectures, in one of the most striking passages in "A Plea" (406). For "new cargoes are being added in

[40] If the story of John Brown's martyrdom became a chapter in *Representative Men*, then Captain Brown would be the only American represented in Emerson's book. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 615-761.

mid ocean," and "a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches," while "the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained, is by 'the quiet diffusion of the sentiments of humanity,' without any 'outbreak' " ("A Plea," 406). Thoreau's John Brown will have nothing to do with the quiet diffusion of sentiments. Thoreau's valorization of Brown advocates, more forcefully than before, the need for real-world political action. Thoreau's reading at Concord Town Hall ultimately supports the abolition of slavery by way of nothing less than social and political "outbreak."

Thoreau may also have been breaking with Emerson in 1859. By this time Thoreau's philosophy of education became more actively political than his transcendentalist mentor's. Emerson had become a vigorous antislavery supporter by the mid-1850s.[41] Emerson was slow to become involved, but abolitionists viewed him as a leading mouthpiece for their movement by the time of Harpers Ferry. Thoreau's response to John Brown seems nonetheless more militant. Thoreau's rhetoric, especially in his revised translation of Emerson's Tacitus, is more combative — more clearly committed to the transcendentalist idea that though is action and words are political weapons, sharp tools to be brandished in their public fight against reigning cultural authorities. Emerson no doubt shared this view. Yet Emerson's conception of the relationship between thought and action, according to Lawrence Buell, contained "a certain fuzziness." "An active mind was more important" to Emerson "than a university degree," Buell explains. "True scholars were independent thinkers, potentially including any person awakened to a state of critical thought." By "American scholar" Emerson

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[41] See Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1990).

meant "thinkers rather than doers who exercised leadership chiefly through their power to grasp and articulate the nature and needs of the times more cogently than others." A key question that Emerson grappled with all his life, finally, was "how intellectual 'work' might count as socially productive." "How does one achieve social efficacy without compromise to serious thought? Emerson's preferred answer, which may have been the best answer, is to appeal to the power of intellectual stimulus and moral invigoration without specifying the how more precisely."[42]

Thoreau may never have solved the problem of thought and action, but he seems to approach the problem with renewed clarity in his handling of the John Brown affair. Buell's reading does not quite accord with the analysis of Michael T. Gilmore and Jack Turner, both of whom argue that Emerson and Thoreau saw words — in the form of public speech and the conscientious expression of moral "right" over "might" — *as* a kind of political activity, and one with far-ranging social implications. In Thoreau's mature imagination, heroic thought seems no longer "subordinate" to action, as it is in Emerson's lecture on "The American Scholar." Thoreau seems to argue, in 1859, that words carry political activity into a new realm, a literary and intellectual arena that has more lasting effect even than a Sharpe's rifle. Thoreau pleads for public intellectual outbreak and moral riot in his handling of the John Brown affair, and he emerges, in the aftermath of Harpers Ferry, as a progressive public intellectual in his own right.[43]

Thoreau's commitment to the antislavery cause reached a fever pitch by the time

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[42] Buell, *Emerson*, 41-2.

[43] Buell argues that Emerson was the first public intellectual in the United States, though Buell admits the term itself was not yet invented in the mid-nineteenth century. See note above.

of Brown's execution. This is not to say that Emerson was somehow unsupportive, or that Emerson was an ineffective antislavery activist, but Thoreau, in his capacity as director of John Brown's memorial service, more clearly conceived his own practice of reading and writing, his own speech-making and carefully planned antislavery rhetoric, as a kind of public activity — as if literary work and social action, in Thoreau's mature view, had become one. In this view Thoreau corrects the "fuzziness" of Emerson's early definition of the American scholar, as one who prioritizes "serious thought" over political activism. To Thoreau, serious thought *is* political resistance. Literary and intellectual work *is* countercultural activity. Thoreau displays this conviction with increased force in his correction of Emerson's Tacitus translation.

As mentioned before, the translation Thoreau actually read on December 2 was almost certainly the work of Emerson. Thoreau apparently started revising Emerson's work soon after the closing hymn at Brown's memorial service in Concord. Franklin Sanborn, who supervised the arrangement of the memorial service for publication in James Redpath's *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, referred to Thoreau's corrected translation as already complete on December 9.[44] We do not know whether Emerson approved Thoreau's corrected translation or not. Thoreau was likely so dissatisfied with Emerson's rendering, when Thoreau read it aloud at Concord Town Hall, that Thoreau just went ahead — without Emerson's "permission" — and reworked the English translation anyway. Emerson was by far the more widely recognized writer at the time. As Wendell Glick has argued, Thoreau very well came to believe that Emerson's words "lacked the

[44] Wendell Glick, "Thoreau Rejects an Emerson Text," 214.

vitality he felt the occasion demanded."[45] Thoreau wanted to assert his own authority as a public intellectual, perhaps, by claiming his own literary and political authorship of the entire John Brown memorial service event. Ceremony proceedings appeared in Redpath's *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* in 1860. The volume has Thoreau's hands all over it. Echoes of Harpers Ferry begins with "A Plea for Captain John Brown" and concludes with the transcript Brown's memorial service — complete with Thoreau's revised Tacitus translation. Redpath's book was distributed widely. It "sold 33,000 copies by February 1860, just three months after" Thoreau first delivered "A Plea," according to Michael T. Gilmore. This makes *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* "the first and only bestseller that Thoreau every wrote."[46]

Thoreau wanted to get the translation right. Thoreau never forgot his Harvard classicism, and he was, after all, a more talented linguist than Emerson. Thoreau published several translations of ancient Greek poetry throughout his lifetime, and he preferred reading the classics — unlike Emerson — in the original language. Yet all his life Thoreau remained in the shadow of the more famous Concord writer. Thoreau's revision makes its own mark. His transcendental Tacitus is a more successful form of literary and civil disobedience:

> You, Agricola, are fortunate, not only because your life was glorious, but because your death was timely. As they tell us who heard your last words, unchanged and willing you accepted your fate; as if, as far as in your power, you would make the emperor appear innocent. But, besides the bitterness of having lost a parent, it adds to our grief, that it was not permitted us to minister to your health, . . . to gaze on your countenance, and receive your last embrace; surely, we might have caught some words and commands which we could have treasured in the inmost part of our

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[45] Glick, 215.

[46] Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 74.

> souls. This is our pain, this our wound . . . . You were buried with the fewer tears, and in your last earthly light, your eyes looked around for something which they did not see. If there is any abode for the spirits of the pious; if, as wise men suppose, great souls are not extinguished with the body, may you rest placidly, and call your family from weak regrets, and womanly laments, to the contemplation of your virtues, which must not be lamented, either silently or aloud. Let us honor you by our admiration, rather than by short-lived praises, and, if nature aid us, by our emulation of you. That is true honor, that the piety of whoever is most akin to you. This also I would teach your family, so to venerate your memory, as to call to mind all your actions and words, and embrace your character and the form of your soul, rather than of your body; not because I think that statues which are made of marble or brass are to be condemned, but as the features of men, so images of the features, are frail and perishable. The form of the soul is eternal; and this we can retain and express, not by a foreign material and art, but by our own lives. Whatever of Agricola we have loved, whatever we have admired, remains, and will remain, in the minds of men, and the records of history, through the eternity of ages. For oblivion will overtake many of the ancients, as if they were inglorious and ignoble: Agricola, described and transmitted to posterity, will survive. ("Martyrdom, 420-21)

Thoreau's revision is more polished. His words are chosen more carefully, and his sentences have a more distinctive cutting edge. His work reached a far wider audience in the pages of Redpath's *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, a book that arguably contributed to the social and political "outbreak" of American civil war. Thoreau seized the moment, in other words, recognizing that it was his time to take the podium and teach antebellum Americans, asserting the power of words as weapons on a national stage.

The opening line of Thoreau's translation already "reveals the two versions differ sharply in tone and content," as Wendell Glick has recognized.[47] "You, Agricola, we may now congratulate," Emerson's translation reads. Thoreau's published version starts more quickly and falls less flat. "You, Agricola, are fortunate," Thoreau writes, "not

[47] Glick, 214.

only because your life was glorious, but because *your death was timely*."[48] Thoreau's version more successfully captures the revolutionary mood of the moment. Brown's life was a "glorious" revolution, after all. His thought and actions were an assertion of self-rule and the power of individual conscience, over and above the imperial authority of the American slave state. In Thoreau's version John Brown's death stands out as more "fortunate" and "timely," because it is a symbol of moral and intellectual renascence, in the midst of widespread social and political degradation.

John Brown's death is timely because he had higher learning. His words and deeds, like the "genius" of great books and authors, will forever challenge the master narrative of dominant cultural power. Thoreau's creative reading — the transcendentalist's use of language — does the same. We have seen how Cornelius Felton claimed, in 1830, that the ancient classics are "eminently practical" (*OCL*, 316). Thoreau applies this thesis to the antislavery cause in 1859. If Captain Brown's "acts and words do not create a revival," Thoreau proclaims in "A Plea," "it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do" (414). The Concord writer felt the same way about his own use of language — his own political activity — in the wake of Harpers Ferry. How else could Thoreau revive his neighbors? How else could he wake antebellum Americans up to the problem of slavery, if not through heroic reading — higher learning — and the use of ancient classics? Thoreau decided to work with tools he already had in his belt. He reached for poetry and the classics, putting his liberal education to work in the world. It was a much needed lesson. Thoreau's translation extends the familial theme of Emerson's version, but makes it sharper: "this is *our* pain,"

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[48] In the next several pages, I italicize Thoreau's words several times for emphasis. In each instance that follows, the italics are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Thoreau writes, "this is *our* wound." Thoreau's translation paints the life of John Brown's as an example of "action from principle," a theme that reaches back to "A Plea" as well. But Thoreau's corrected translation of Tacitus more fully resonates with his own essay on "Civil Disobedience."

Emerson's version makes similar associations, emphasizing the transcendentalist theme of "living out" or performing one's ethics. John Brown is a father figure, after all, one whose model of practical morality we all must follow. "We have lost a parent," Emerson writes, "and we suffer that it was not in our power to gaze upon you with earnest affection, and see your expiring glance." His translation nonetheless is clunky. Thoreau's revision is more faithful to the original Latin. Thoreau captures the "bitterness" (*acerbitatem*) and "grief" (*maestitiam*) of losing such an significant family member.

This is another sense in which Brown's death — and Thoreau's framing of it — is "timely." Thoreau's work vividly captures the anguish of a divided house, a national "family" torn apart by the conflict over slavery. There is a certain depth of human emotion, a sense of tragedy and loss in the original Latin, which Emerson misses almost entirely. Emerson's translation feels wooden, as if he struggled to render the Latin passage in a way that would speak to modern American citizens. Emerson did in fact struggle with his translation. His manuscript is full of English language deletions and entire lines of English are crossed out.[49] Emerson chose not to include whole portions of the original text, as if he didn't quite know what to do with the Latin. Although there is no remaining manuscript evidence of Thoreau's translation-in-progress, his published

[49] Glick, 215.

version flows with far more eloquence. For "besides the bitterness of having lost a parent," Thoreau writes, "it adds to our grief, that it was not permitted us to minister to your health, . . . to gaze on your countenance, and receive your last embrace; surely, we might have caught some words and commands which we could have treasured in the inmost part of our souls. This is our pain, this is our wound." Thoreau even indicates by way of the ellipses that he is leaving out some of Tacitus's phrasing. Thoreau's work nonetheless captures the pain and suffering not only of John Brown, hanging from the gallows, but also the emotion of the abolitionist's loved ones, all those who would "minister" to the health of a father, lingering, and yearning, for one last "gaze" or "embrace."

This is our pain, *this* is our wound. Thoreau's translation stand apart — strong and powerful. We have lost a truly good citizen, a father-in-law who exercised fine judgment and possessed strong moral sense, one made not of wood but whose words we should treasure in our inmost soul. "In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense," Thoreau proclaims in his well-known essay on "Civil Disobedience." Most men "put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens."[50] John Brown cannot be "manufactured." His life and work exuded far more liberty and independence, far more human vitality than that. Thoreau's translation embraces Brown with the same high sentiment, the same tenderness and caring, that is,

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[50] Thoreau, *Collected Poems and Essays*, 205.

the same open heart and broad mind with which John Brown himself accepted "the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave power" ("A Plea," 417).

Thoreau's translation imagines tending to the health of the antebellum era's most radical, violent abolitionist. The tenderness of his translation is striking. Thoreau imagines tending to Captain Brown in his final hour. All of us should gaze upon Brown's countenance, and receive his last embrace, as this enemy of the state, this convicted of murder, who some called a common criminal, trudged off to his death. Again Thoreau avoids the graphic nature of Brown's antislavery violence, painting him, instead, as a hero hanging on the cross. This is part of Thoreau's strategy of humanizing Brown, like Jesus Christ, while deifying him all at the same time. It is hard to imagine a more compelling — and divisive — scene. Thoreau believed most American citizens, including those who live in New England, viewed the problem of slavery through the lens of their own narrow self-interest. His translation of Tacitus is meant to jolt his neighbors out of their own habit of single-mindedness. "There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them," he continues in "Civil Disobedience." There are those "who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing." In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau's reference to the U.S. invasion of Mexico is wrapped up with his critique of the imperialist expansion of slavery. Those who call themselves "citizens even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade," he fumes, "and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both.

What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot to-day?"[51]

John Brown recognized the price of freedom is death in 1859. Only Brown "so loved wisdom," so to speak, that he "live[d] according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (*W*, 344). One need not be a professor or the founder of a school to achieve such higher learning. Ten years after the publication of "Civil Disobedience," and almost five years after the publication of *Walden*, Thoreau takes a more militant approach to social reform. He promotes not just a change in perspective, or the cultivation of a broad mind and open heart, but also a Captain Brown-like commitment to social justice in 1859.

Thoreau's transcendental Tacitus claims that the "family" of Captain Brown must be called from their "weak regrets" to higher "contemplation" of his "virtues." Yet Thoreau does not stop there. "Let us honor you by our admiration, rather than by short-lived praises, and, if nature aid us, *by emulation of you*." Thoreau seems to address, at this point, not just those who were so violently against John Brown, those Concord citizens, for example, who threatened to fire minute-guns, or those who sat by with their hands in their pockets, calling John Brown a traitor and madman. Thoreau addresses his own transcendentalist family, and all supporters within range of his hearing. Thoreau's "universal liturgy," as uttered at Concord Town Hall and published in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, was after all made up of "short-lived praises." Powerful statements, to be sure. But Thoreau's revised version of Tacitus calls for "action from principle" more clearly than he had in the past. It is time to "emulate" Captain Brown, Thoreau proclaims in his translation of Tacitus. "*That* is true honor, *that* the piety of whoever is most akin to" him.

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[51] Thoreau, *Collected Poems and Essays*, 207-09.

Was Thoreau issuing in part a challenge to himself? Was he summoning the courage to put his own increasingly violent rhetoric more firmly into action? Or did Thoreau recognize that his words, published to the world, in fact had longer range? Perhaps Thoreau did not want to throw his own life away, after all. Perhaps he recognized that a strong fight, and lasting change, could only come about through a war of words — a battle for ideas and higher learning. It does seem possible that Thoreau's words carried a special message to his friends, all those who were part of the transcendental and abolitionist "family." It is time to follow the example — the "commands" — of Captain John Brown. The time to act is now. Emerson's translation does contain strong words: "to emulate" Brown's "bright example will be the truest mark of our respect, the best tribute your family can offer." But again Thoreau's revision extends and sharpens, and in this sense "corrects" the translation of his mentor. The final flourish of Thoreau's translation drives home the force of his vision. "The form of the soul is eternal," Thoreau writes. For "this we can retain and express, not by foreign material and art, but by our own lives."

Can a well-lived life, devoted to teaching and learning, transcendental higher learning, that is, and the public performance of "right" over "might," actually transform the world as effectively as the heroic actions and symbolic death of Captain John Brown? The question is a challenging one, and Thoreau's final answer can only be speculation on our part. I am not saying that Thoreau rejects Emerson's translation outright in the wake of Harpers Ferry. Thoreau builds upon, extends, and revises it. In the same sense, Thoreau builds upon, extends and revises Emerson's theory of the American scholar. "The form of the soul is eternal, and we can retain and express that, not by a foreign

material and art, but by our own virtues," Emerson writes in his Tacitus translation. This line reflects Emerson's approach to lifelong learning as an imaginative journey, a quest in pursuit of practical ethics. Thoreau's translation picks up the same idea but makes it more prominent. We can follow the example of John Brown, not just by "foreign material and art, *but by our own lives.*" Thoreau revision seems more focused on the significance of acting on our principles and "living" out our higher learning. "Whatever of Agricola we have loved," Thoreau concludes, "whatever we have admired, remains, and will remain, in the minds of men, and the records of history, through the eternity of ages." Thoreau's final sentences emphasize his own role in the historical process. "For oblivion will overtake many of the ancients, as if they were inglorious and ignoble: Agricola, described and transmitted to posterity, will survive."

Thoreau describes and transmits the heroic character and actions of John Brown to posterity. We can criticize him for leaving out the bloody details of Brown's activism. And we can criticize Thoreau's literary and intellectual work, his framing of John Brown for posterity, as courageous but not quite political — or activist — enough. But this interpretation does not take seriously Thoreau's evolving belief that his words and ideas — his performance of transcendental higher learning — had long range potential for reshaping American culture and politics. His handling of Harpers Ferry performs the work of a public intellectual, an American scholar, by talking back to authority — and refusing to accept the master narrative handed down by dominant culture. In this pursuit Thoreau was following the example of John Brown as well. David S. Reynolds has recognized that Captain Brown's words, written and spoken by him in the weeks leading up to his execution, reached around the world through the popular press and other

publications. More than anything, Brown's own speeches and letters transformed him into the symbol of radical countercultural activity that he is now known.[52] Reynolds argues that the sectarian polarization following Harpers Ferry led to the outbreak of the Civil War. In Reynolds's portrait, Captain Brown's words and actions, transmitted to posterity by the transcendentalists and others, also helped seed the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century. Black leaders of the Civil Rights Movement admired John Brown, and proponents of non-resistance, like Martin Luther King, Jr., were deeply influenced by the words and ideas of Thoreau. This is to say nothing of international figures in the fight for human rights, including Gandhi, who also made use of Thoreau's philosophy as a weapon, a tool in their own battle against dominant culture. Twentieth-century reformers, including Martin Luther King, did not see the non-resistance movement as "passive" or "unpolitical." Like Thoreau, they viewed non-violent activity as a weapon with long-range potential and deeply transformative force.

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Most antebellum American romantics believed their "voicing was a form of acting," according to Michael T. Gilmore.[53] In these terms Thoreau's transcendental Tacitus makes good on — and perhaps even extends — his central thesis in "Civil Disobedience." "Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly

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[52] Reynolds, 334-69.

[53] Gilmore, *The War on Words*, 8.

with anything which was."[54] This statement captures Thoreau's mature education philosophy. Creative reading and writing, public speaking *as* political action was central to Thoreau's conception of democratic individualism — his idea of what it means to be a fully active citizen, a contributing member of society, an imaginative and ever-growing, though not-yet-fully-realized human self. "Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine," Thoreau continues in "Civil Disobedience."[55] It is in this sense that Thoreau's political philosophy, toward the end of his life, merged with his theory of lifelong liberal learning. To the transcendentalists as a group, higher learning changes things and relations. It is essentially revolutionary.

Thoreau was not the only Concord writer who conceived education this way. With more clarity than others, however, he saw books and reading as "counter-friction," a way to rub up against and question — not blindly fall in line — with the imperial march of dominant cultural authority. Thoreau did not arrive at this notion immediately. It emerged out of his experience at Harvard and throughout the course of his life of reading and writing. As a graduating senior at Harvard, in the summer of 1837, Thoreau argued that antebellum Americans must learn to live a more intellectual and spiritual life. In *A Week* and *Walden*, the only two book-length works Thoreau published in his lifetime, he further develops his quasi-religious theory of reading and "higher" education as a form of antimaterialism. Together, these two books serve as literary and intellectual training ground, in which Thoreau works out the mature philosophy of transcendental higher learning that he puts to work so effectively in his handling of the John Brown affair.

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[54] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 210.

[55] Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 210.

Higher learning emerges most clearly, then, in 1859, when his philosophy of education became more actively progressive and publicly political. The movement of his educational thought is from self-cultivation to social reform, as Thoreau's idea of practicing the liberal arts became less private — more of a public spectacle, a literary and intellectual act of political defiance.

This brings us back to my initial suggestion that Thoreau's philosophy of education resonates with some of our own most ambitious plans to revitalize the study of liberal arts in the twenty-first century. As seen in my introduction, The American Academy of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) defines liberal education as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change." According to the AAC&U, "A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings."[56] In the view of Timothy K. Eastman, public scholarship can be defined as "scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequences."[57] Both these views broadly resonate with progressive theories of education that developed in the twentieth century. "Although there are numerous differences of style and emphasis among progressive educators," writes The John Dewey Project, "they share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect

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[56] "What is a 21st Century Liberal Education?"

[57] Qtd. in Ellison, 289-98.

their lives. The education of engaged citizens, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: (1). *Respect for diversity,* meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2). the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good."[58] Progressive education's focus on "the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*" is a major theme in three separate scholarly accounts that I discussed in my introduction as well.

Martha Nussbaum defines higher learning as a form of "human development," as we have seen, a creative pursuit that must be protected on its own terms.[59] Andrew Delbanco argues that higher education is a distinctly American innovation. Delbanco highlights several qualities, including what he calls "A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past," and "willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own." Delbanco includes the cultivation of "A sense of ethical responsibility," furthermore, as one of the key elements that distinguish the liberal arts model as it has developed in the history of American higher education.[60] key elements of the liberal arts model in the American higher education system. Michael S. Roth delivers a similar argument in favor of conceiving higher education as "an intellectual and experiential adventure" rather than "a bureaucratic assignment of skill

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[58] "A Brief Overview of Progressive Education."

[59] Nussbaum, 16.

[60] Delbanco, 3.

capacity."[61]

All of these sources — the AAC&U, Timothy K. Eastman, The John Dewey Project, Nussbaum, Delbanco, and Roth — draw on ideas that resonate with transcendentalist theories of higher learning. Some of them do so explicitly.[62] None of these sources, however, mention the distinct contribution of Henry David Thoreau. My concluding claim is that Thoreau deserves a more prominent place in the history and theory of progressive education in the United States.

Several of the sources mentioned above maintain an instrumentalist, and at times economic or utilitarian perspective, which Thoreau would have disdained, in other words, but their progressive views of higher education were in many ways anticipated by Thoreau himself. Several advocates for the reform of twentieth-century American higher education cite Emerson in their discussion of liberal arts. But Thoreau was an equally dynamic educational thinker: his philosophy of transcendental higher learning was, as I have suggested, in some ways more actively political and reformist than Emerson's.

When Emerson used the term "scholar," he meant "thinkers rather than doers who exercised leadership chiefly through their power to grasp and articulate the nature and needs of the times more cogently than others."[63] It was Thoreau, not Emerson, who took the lead at John Brown's memorial service in Concord. Thoreau exercised leadership by *doing*, and grasped the nature and needs of the times just as powerfully as Emerson. Thoreau's translation of Tacitus more clearly articulates the widespread personal and

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[61] Roth, 8.

[62] In *Not For Profit* (61-65), Nussbaum cites the example of Bronson Alcott, for instance, and in *Beyond the University* Roth discusses Emerson (47-61).

[63] Buell, *Emerson*, 41.

public distress wrapped up with the Harpers Ferry affair, as antebellum Americans grappled with the problem of slavery. In this moment Thoreau extends — and arguably transcends — the example of his more famous mentor. On the eve of the Civil War, three years before his death, Thoreau can be seen asserting his own authority as a public intellectual, although Emerson was far more widely known.

There is one last twist that helps draw out my reading. Tacitus himself can be viewed as a public intellectual of sorts. By one way of looking, the ancient Roman historian anticipated Thoreau's more social and political conception of the American scholar. Tacitus perceived the nature and needs of the times more cogently than many other Roman writers. We have seen how Tacitus praised the life and work of his father-in-law, the Roman general and statesman Agricola. The passage Thoreau read at John Brown's funeral stands out as high praise, one that raises Agricola up to god-like human status. But despite his family connections, and in spite of his desire to honor Agricola, Tacitus saw clearly the destructive nature of Roman empire. Tacitus supported the idea of imperial expansion, like most Roman citizens, and he saw military and political power as intricately related. Yet Tacitus also recognized that "changes brought by rule are as much to the bad as to the good," in the words of one commentator. Tacitus's life of Agricola even "displays a talent for vividly representing the grievances of native peoples against Roman expansion."[64]

Tacitus was no simple-minded supporter of Roman empire. He had no universal woodenness of head and heart about him. Writing in the first century AD, Tacitus was not just a cog in the wheel of ancient Roman bureaucracy. One of the most powerful

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[64] J.B. Rives, Introduction, in Tacitus: Agricola and Germania, transl. Harold Mattingly, rev. with introd. and notes by J. B. Rives (New York: Penguin, 2009), xxx-xxxi).

moments in his narrative life of Agricola, viewed as a whole, is the speech of Calgacus — leader of the oppressed Britons over whom Agricola ruled. "Indeed, perhaps the most memorable line in the entire work," writes J.B. Rives, "sums up how outsiders might have viewed the conquests of the Romans: 'they create desolation and call it peace,'" as Tacitus describes it. Tacitus praises the administrative work of his father-in-law, but the Latin historian's portrait of ancient Roman life — beginning in the *Agricola* and extending through Tacitus's later historical work — is quite critical of the destruction caused by imperial rule.[65] Throughout his career as a writer, Tacitus learned to wield his own historical work as a tool to combat the dangers of centralized government. Tacitus learned that "resistance to tyranny" can be "most useful, and most necessary, when it t[akes] the form of challenging . . . attempts to control speech and thought and memory." He perceived the grave danger of "systematic attempt[s] on the part of the emperor to control information and to repress the free exchange of ideas, to ensure that the only available narrative of the principate was the one that the emperors themselves propagated," J.B. Rives explains. In his capacity as a historian, Tacitus recognized that "if he could never recover the full truth," he "could at least expose the distortions produced by tyrannical power."[66]

Thoreau exposed the distortions produced by tyrannical power in his handling of the John Brown affair. Just as the ancient historical work of Tacitus talks back to imperial authority, Thoreau's theory and practice of higher learning — his idea of heroic reading and writing — strikes back at modern institutional abuses of power. Thoreau

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[65] Rives, xxxi, xxvii.

[66] Rives, xxxiii.

writes his own narrative, crafts his own message, in his shaping of events surrounding Harpers Ferry. His narrative challenges the story told at the center of antebellum American spheres of influence. In fact, as we have seen, Thoreau strikes hard at the very foundation of antebellum cultural and intellectual power. Thoreau's universal liturgy is in this sense a form of "outsider classicism."[67] His reading of ancient classics cuts the Harvard humanists down and exposes the distortions of all those who fail to live by their own conception of "liberal culture." Thoreau's translation of Tacitus delivers this message, in the end, more powerfully than Emerson's. In a thrilling twist of literary and intellectual history, Thoreau's mature view of reading and writing appears quite similar to that of the ancient historian Tacitus. Thoreau's engagement with history, his reading of poetry, mythology, and the classics, in this way emerges not as a sign of cultural privilege but ultimately as a challenge — a positive strike back — to it.

[67] In "Ancient History, American Time: Chesnutt's Outsider Classicism and the Presence of the Past," John Levi Barnard argues that the African-American writer Charles Chesnutt made "use of the classical tradition as a mode of resistant to the dominant narrative of American history" (74). Thoreau and the transcendentalists made use of the ancient classics as a form of resistance to dominant cultural narratives as well.

Epilogue

Transcendental Higher Learning for the Twenty-First Century

As I conclude this dissertation, I want to take one last look at the broader implications of my project, all of which speak to the enduring significance of Thoreau's theory and practice of transcendental higher learning. The Concord writers' idea of creative reading and liberal education boiled down to their belief in the transformative power of books. This conviction, as I have argued, had deep roots in the antebellum classical college and development of liberal learning in the United States. Historians of transcendentalism have not sufficiently traced the way in which Thoreau and the Concord writers revised, adapted, extended and the core teachings of Harvard new humanism.

Thoreau never forgot what he learned while he was an undergraduate at Harvard. If the female transcendentalists were barred from the institutional classical college in the nineteenth century, simply because of their gender, then they too, alongside Emerson and Thoreau, imbibed, adapted, and transformed Harvard new humanism for their own political purposes as well. There are many examples of *female* transcendental higher learning that I have left out of the preceding chapters. Yet in many ways the classical education of figures like Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Margaret Fuller, Sarah Ripley, and Mary Moody Emerson surpassed the pursuits of their male counterparts in the nineteenth century. As I mentioned in my introduction, Elizabeth Peabody conceived the theory and practice of reading as a kind of assertion, a creative activity in which she cultivated her own "intellectual and priestly power," in the words of Phyllis Cole and Jane

Argersinger.[1] In their exploration of "A Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism," Cole and Argensinger recognize the power of books and reading in the female transcendentalist imagination. They do not, however, theorize the role of ancient classics and Harvard new humanism in the educational vision of Peabody and other female education reformers. In her role as transcendentalist tutor, Peabody taught Greek and Latin to young women throughout her life. Peabody established her own classical school, so to speak, at her West Street bookshop in Boston, where she catered to an eclectic audience of broad-gauged, widely diffused and creative readers. Margaret Fuller was tutored from a very young age by her Harvard new humanist father. Fuller grappled with her father's intellectual authority throughout her life, ultimately putting her higher learning to work for proto-feminist purposes, in her "Conversations" for women and her social and political writing. Other transcendentalist cultural critics, like Bronson Alcott, who had no formal schooling, were innovative practitioners of liberal education as well. The school for human culture at Brook Farm was one of the most successful aspects of the utopian experiment there. At Brook Farm, as well as Fruitlands and Alcott's Temple School, the transcendentalists' curriculum was build on the foundation of ancient Greek and Latin classics.

We need a full book-length study of transcendentalism as an education movement that was grounded in the culture of Harvard classicism. This work will recover the Concord writers as serious philosophers of education who were wrapped up with the broader history of liberal arts and the study of humanities, as an intellectual endeavor that was not just a strong arm of cultural conservatism, but, in fact, a vehicle for progressive

[1] "Exaltadas: A Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism," 6.

social and political action in the nineteenth century. A long history of transcendentalism as a "new humanist" education movement would open a fresh window into the long-term contribution of Emerson, Thoreau, Peabody, Fuller, Sarah Ripley, Mary Moody Emerson, and others. The transcendentalists' wide and eager approach to books and reading infused other aspects of their thought with lasting energy.

The Concord writers approached books, as I have mentioned, for example, in much the same way that they perceived nature — that is, as a dynamically transformative, aesthetic and political act. Reading the text of nature *and* books, in the transcendentalist imagination, has the power to expand the self — widening our perspectives and healing the wounds, correcting and combating what they saw as the narrowness of modern business and proto-industrial culture.

In this sense transcendental higher learning was wrapped up with the Concord writers' environmental vision. A longer history would address the relationship between transcendental classicism and the Concord writers' idea of nature. Such a work would also speak more forcefully to the twenty-first century relevance of transcendental higher learning. If Thoreau and the Concord writers were alive today, they would have trouble understanding the current state of American higher education. First, they would wrinkle their brown at twenty-first century arguments that conceive higher learning in terms of economic development. The transcendentalists would reject this notion. They conceived education and reading as a basic human need, a driving hunger that must be protected for its own purposes, rather than cut up, counted, commodified, and construed solely in terms of markets and money.

Although many twenty-first century education reformers reject models of higher learning conceived as economic development, they at the same time retain a language of economic value that borders on utilitarianism. The American Association of Colleges & Universities writes that liberal education "pay[s] off over a lifetime."[2] In much the same vein, the president of Saint Michael's College in Vermont defends the liberal arts by claiming that "The humanities tend to educate people much farther out. They're looking for impact that last over decades, not just when you're 22."[3] This may sound right to reform-minded ears, but in the same article, we learn that "Thomas College, a liberal arts school in Maine, advertises itself as the Home of the Guaranteed Job! Students who can't find work in their fields within six months of graduation can come back to take classes for free, or have the college pay their student loans for a year."[4]

Too many twenty-first century reformers of American higher education conceive liberal learning solely in terms of job training and the accumulation of personal and public wealth over the course of a "lifetime." If the transcendentalists saw education as useful, it was not in terms of materialism but human development, civic engagement, and social reform. In her controversial curriculum reforms at Bennington College, President Elizabeth Coleman has taken just such a progressive approach. Coleman argues that the liberal arts should focus on broad subject areas relevant to the most pressing social and cultural problems of our time. Colleges should re-engage with the communities around them by focusing on issues related to human health, social equity, the environment,

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[2] Schneider, 2.

[3] Kate Zernike, "Making College 'Relevant,'" *New York Times,* December 29, 2009.

[4] Zernike, "Making College 'Relevant.'"

education, government, and the abuse of political power. Coleman's speech on "The Bennington Curriculum: A New Liberal Arts" confirms her view. "Civic consciousness and behavior are formed at the intersection of study and engagement — reflection and action — and in public settings where difference and conflict are plentiful and treated as assets, instead of liabilities."[5] And yet, despite the persistence of such leading voices, critics of higher education who fancy themselves progressives, and even activists, loudly assert that the study of language, literature, history, and culture continues to be hamstrung by the legacy of social and cultural conservatism. This part of the story of American higher education — and the study of literature, in particular — is no doubt true. But it fails to recognize the long history of books and reading as a form of progressive cultural critique in the United States.

The study of language, literature, history and culture has never been simply the strong arm of cultural elites. Historically, it has also been a tool, indeed, a weapon in the battle to remake American society along more radically humanist, democratic grounds. Thoreau's universal liturgy, his reading of poetry and the ancient classics at John Brown's memorial service on December 2, 1859, is just one example of the progressive political practice of liberal arts. A long history of transcendentalism as an education movement would help recover the more positive — and frankly hopeful — tradition of public humanities. A model of active reception, and the consumption, digestion, and application of texts, in fact strikes to the heart of the transcendentalist movement. The Concord writers' way of thinking, their model of public intellectual engagement, like the

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[5] Coleman, "The Bennington Curriculum: A New Liberal Arts," Delivered at the Celebration of Bennington College's 75th Anniversary, October 6, 2007, http://bennington.edu/go/about-bennington/a-new-liberal-arts.

practice of Harvard new humanism, was deeply transformative. The transcendentalists' hunger for higher learning was in the end insatiable. They could not get enough creative reading: all of the transcendentalists, major and minor, remained wide and eager reading throughout their lives. They saw academic work as social and political engagement of an enduring reformist variety. To be an American scholar, in their view, meant to refuse the status quo.

As we look forward to reforming the idea of liberal arts in the twenty-first century, we would do well to follow their example.

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