Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 9 (58) No. 1 – 2016

Surveying the Interval: Henry David Thoreau's Climb of Saddle-back Mountain in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

Iuliu RAȚIU[1]

In July 1844, on route to the Catskill Mountains in New York, Henry David Thoreau climbed Saddleback Mt. (now Greylock), the highest natural point in Massachusetts. Situated in the northwestern part of the state, the mountain is traversed by a network of hiking trails, including the tail end of the Appalachian Trail. Thoreau later described this experience in his first published book A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, whose manuscript he wrote during his stay at Walden Pond between 1845 and 1847. In my paper, I analyze Thoreau's description of the climb and cast the ascent as a meditation in the Romantic tradition of the quest for the sacred and for the sublime.*

Key-words: *Thoreau, Romanticism, mountain literature, land surveying*

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Henry David Thoreau's first book that he published in 1849, relates the boating and hiking trip that he and his brother John took through Massachusetts and New Hampshire in 1839. For artistic and strategic purposes, Thoreau condenses the events that lasted two weeks into one week arranged within eight sections. "Concord River," the first introductory section describing the river, in terms of its flora, fauna, and geography with detailed historical and mythological references, is followed by seven sections reflecting the days of the week, Saturday through Friday.

The trip commences in the "Saturday" section with the launch of a boat built by the Thoreau brothers and painted symbolically green and blue. As the narrative progresses, Thoreau describes the plant and marine life he sees. By nightfall, the brothers have left civilization behind and ventured into the primitive wilds of nature. The "Sunday" section includes meditations on the essences of nature, religion, and poetry, including a comparison between ancient gods and Christ. In "Monday," Thoreau contrasts the contemplative values of the East with the hasty activity of the West, and, toward the end of the day, he expresses a feeling of

[1] Ştefan Odobleja Fellow, New Europe College, Bucharest, iratiu@gmail.com

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

transcendence in which he senses himself one with the universe. "Tuesday" describes at length and in symbolic detail the climbing of Mt. Greylock /Saddle-back Mountain in anticipation of the mountain hike the brothers would later take atop Uncannunuc Mountain, for which they interrupt their boat trip on Thursday. "Wednesday" concerns itself with Thoreau's ideal of true friendship—a friendship that attains a spiritual level of intensity and purity, while "Thursday" is devoted to hiking and the brothers' recognition of the approach of autumn. The brothers resume their river trip a week later, in "Friday," and travel downstream back home to Concord as Thoreau muses on death and immortality.

Moreover, the two brothers' boat trip along the Concord and Merrimack rivers and atop Uncannunuc Mountain circumscribes a bird's eye or panoramic view of a territory which epitomizes the link between land and character, as expressed in the chapter "The Pond in Winter" from *Walden*:

> If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular results at that point. [...] What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of average. Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us toward the sun in the system and the heart in man, but draws lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man's particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character. (290-1)

A Week, however, allows Thoreau to literally measure and map out the coordinates of American landscape and character:

> Sitting with our faces now up stream, we studied the landscape by degrees, as one unrolls a map, rock, tree, house, hill, and meadow, assuming new and varying positions as wind and water shifted the scene, and there was variety enough for our entertainment in the metamorphoses of the simplest objects. Viewed from this side the scenery appeared new to us. (349)

On the last leg of their journey, Thoreau and his brother return to the place/point of their departure as summer turns into autumn. The seasonal change is, therefore, the background against which the author projects "the metamorphoses of the simplest objects." Rowing against the stream, the travelers impose and project their human touch and resistance on the natural environment that constantly shifts the scene and transforms the scenery into something new to them.

However, "the new and varying positions" are as much a consequence of wind and water as of a newly acquired skill: the study of landscape on a map. This

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

new perspective, however, that allows the author to study "the landscape by degrees, as one unrolls a map," presents almost the exact opposite of what it is supposed to represent: the flux and variety of the natural world are thus disconnected from their metamorphoses in order to be represented on the map by degrees.

What is at stake in *A Week*, then, is the laying of the ground and foundations of Thoreau's future work: identifying the interval (spatial and temporal) whose thorough mapping (surveying) will evoke eventually the tie between land and human character. The overlap between landscape and its representation is partial only insofar as the author, both as map-maker and mapped character, is merely unrolling the map. Once the map is unrolled, however, the landscape loses its morphing character and gains a static quality that then can be "studied by degrees." That this is the conventional aspect of any map is beyond dispute, and Thoreau makes no secret of it: rock, tree, house, hill, and meadow all assume varying and new positions that can be stabilized only on the map.

Moreover, this gradation from the rock to the meadow reinscribes the coordinates of the Pilgrims' and then the Puritans' contact with nature and their subsequent settling of America. Here is how Thoreau used this gradation in *A Week*:

> Now I crossed a hay-field, and now over the brook on a slight bridge, still gradually ascending all the while with a sort of awe, and filled with indefinite expectations as to what kind of inhabitants and what kind of nature I should come to at last. (115)

Thoreau later uses gradation as a purposeful prop in *Walden* as well as in a letter from 1860 to H.G.O. Blake. In *Walden*, civilization and travel by railroad are tantamount to grading the surface of the planet: "To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet" (53). During a time of westward expansion and complete trust in progress, the railroad replaces the natural elements of the landscape in order to grade and layout the planet. Land and territory, mankind and planet alike are therefore mapped as the railroad is built around the world. In the letter to Blake, however, the know-how of civilization, trade, and progress is seriously questioned:

> Men & boys are learning; all kinds of trades but how to make men of themselves. They learn to make houses, but they are not so well housed, they are not so contented in their houses, as the woodchucks in their holes. What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on? If you can not tolerate the planet it is on? Grade the ground first. (579)

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

Communication, trade, and travel afforded by the railroad moving goods and people around the planet seem to be overrated if the planet is not tolerable. What this passage suggests is that the way to a tolerable life and to a tolerable planet is predicated on the grading of the ground, on its careful measuring and surveying. As a man-made artifact, a house does not pertain to housing unless a level of contentment is achieved by the grading of the ground.

The generating capabilities of landscape represented in *Walden*'s "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" become relevant once we realize that in *A Week* Thoreau is not interested in finding the centrifugal but, rather, the centripetal qualities of landscape.[2] Travelling up and down the Concord and Merrimack, he is in a position to measure and map out a territory whose center needs to be found in order to represent the landscape "by degrees." In a sense, then, the world and the universe-at-large are no different from the territory circumscribed and circumnavigated by the two brothers in their two-week journey.

The law of average that Thoreau discovered in *Walden* is prefigured in *A Week* by the move from the natural representation of landscape to the cartographic abstraction of the "bird's eye view" map. Aware that the world has "many rings," he sets out to discover its center:

> This world has many rings, like Saturn, and we live now on the outmost of them all. None can say deliberately that he inhabits the same sphere, or is contemporary with, the flower which his hands have plucked, and though his feet may seem to crush it, inconceivable spaces and ages separate them, and perchance there is no danger that he will hurt it. What do the botanists know? Our lives should go between the lichen and the bark. The eye may see for the hand, but not for the mind. We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon and stars, and shall not see clearly till after nine days at least. That is a pathetic inquiry among travelers and geographers after the site of ancient Troy. It is not near where they think it is. When a thing is decayed and gone, how indistinct must be the place it occupied! (384-5)

The Transcendental tone of this passage suggests the influence that Ralph Waldo Emerson had on Thoreau and, at the same time, recapitulates the main tenets of a Romantic tradition soon to be challenged by the latter, who acts both as a botanist collecting specimens for Louis Agassiz and as a geographer surveying his neighbor's woodlots and pastures. The heroic past becomes important insofar as heroes and heroines do not necessarily remain relegated to a Golden Age. As the

[2] For more about the generating capabilities of landscape, please see my essay "Land Surveying as a Poetic Exercise in *Walden* and 'Walking'" published in *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, N.S. Vol. 21, 2013.

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

geographer becomes a hero in his own terms, so does the farmer become capable of heroic deeds by working the lands that Thoreau surveys. Here is another example, from the beginning of the "Concord River" chapter, where he explains what it means to be studying the landscape by degrees in order to inscribe it on a map:

> It is worth the while to make a voyage up this stream, if you go no farther than Sudbury, only to see how much country there is in the rear of us; great hills, and a hundred brooks, and farm-houses, and barns, and haystacks, you never saw before, and men everywhere, Sudbury, that is Southborough men, and Wayland, and Nine-Acre-Corner men, and Bound Rock, where four towns bound on a rock in the river, Lincoln, Wayland, Sudbury, Concord. (7)

The voyage up the stream might signify a return to heroic times, but it also allows Thoreau to achieve a new spatial perspective on the present time, as later evidenced by the description of the mountaineers. By showing that the present is capable of creating its own heroic individuals, he could then signal toward the importance of simple farmers who appear to be "greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare [even though they] never took the way of writing":

> You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, keeping their castles, or teaming up their summer's wood, or chopping alone in the woods, men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain, than a chestnut is of meat; who were out not only in '75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way of writing. Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper. Or what have they not written on the face of the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment. (8)

To put Troy, as well as Concord, on the map, the work of the historian, geographer, or botanist is no longer enough for the present generation since "the universe is a sphere whose center is wherever there is intelligence. The sun is not so central as a man" (349). Next to imagination, intelligence, both as knowledge and understanding, offers a new way of representation. The alternative that Thoreau offers to writing as a way of representation implemented by Homer, Chaucer, or Shakespeare comes from writing and reading about the deeds of those individuals whose way of representation is given by working the land.

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

Deciphering their work in the landscape by conducting detailed and graded surveys of these individuals' lands and actions becomes Thoreau's literary focus. By looking at their fields, the author is capable of authoring their work for them by imagining "what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper." His literary and land surveys become the parchment that documents their settling of America by "clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling" a land full of possibilities.

As a narrative, *A Week* offers two alternative temporal investigations: one, of the roving mind, and the other of the natural territory that spans both geography and history. As its title suggests, *A Week* is a travelogue in which Thoreau recalls the boat trip that he and his brother John took in August and September of 1839. The book is revelatory for the symbolic possibilities attached to it, such as the fact that the brothers built the boat themselves and painted it green and blue in reference to the "elements in which it was to spend its existence," as well as for the romantic undertones of the excursion itself imagined as a meditative incursion into time and as a passage way between summer and autumn. Moreover, *A Week* is particularly important for the elegiac tone in which Thoreau wrote the narrative which he considered an homage to his brother's memory who died prematurely almost three years after the actual journey.

On the one hand, there's Lawrence Buell's interpretation of *A Week*'s narrative as a record of "transcendental sensibility" which chronicles "the succession of a sensitive mind's meditations in nature" in the form of a romantic travelogue that imagines a journey through space as a journey through time (both natural and historical); on the other, there's Sherman Paul's treatment of *A Week* as the record of the "ecstasy" Thoreau felt during his years at Walden Pond. In strict biographical and historical time, Henry and John Thoreau travel up and down Merrimack and Concord rivers over a period of two weeks in August and September of 1839. This is the time of experience. A few years afterwards, following John's death in 1842 and Henry's move to Walden Pond in 1845, Thoreau sets forth to re-create that trip as a narrative memorial to his brother. This, then, would be the time of remembrance. However, during the writing process, Thoreau manages to reconfigure the journey through time as an ecstatic present experience which transposes history into the imaginary.

The fact that Thoreau is at Walden Pond when he writes *A Week* helps us to understand better the unlikely outcome of his endeavor. Remembering a voyage down the river while sitting on the shore of a pond shatters the conventional perception of the flowing of historical time. The tropes that Thoreau would use later in *Walden* are already present in *A Week*, which he writes during his retreat along the shores of the pond itself. As Sherman Paul argues, *A Week* is just the first draft of *Walden*, and so, it is an instance that allows Thoreau to speculate on a theme that

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

interested the author from the beginning of his literary career: the relation between appearance and being. This is why *A Week* reads as an intentionally open-ended story prematurely closed, a mystery without a single solution, in that he was not only establishing the foundations of his enterprise but he was also trying to find the point of reference and the center of his future surveys. The scientific measurement of the pond is thus predicated on finding a point of reference as well as on finding a measuring unit, hence the importance of climbing mountains in order to get a bird's eye view of the territory.

Rivers and mountains make the "complex weave" of symbolic possibilities in the landscape of *A Week*, as Linck Johnson points out in Thoreau's *Complex Weave¸ The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. The book, according to Johnson,

> was less the product of direct observation than of recollection, imagination, and craft [...] being composed of a carefully orchestrated series of excursions through New England, at once a pastoral realm, a primitive wilderness, and a bustling industrial region (3-4).

Moreover, as critics have routinely noticed, in travel narratives chronology becomes a function of memory rather than of experience, and this characteristic of the genre allows Thoreau to compress a two-week excursion up and down Merrimack and Concord rivers into one and later permits him to compress his two-year stay at Walden Pond within the boundless limits of a natural year from one spring to the other.

More than in *A Week* and *Walden*, chronology plays an important role in the journal, where the time of recreation becomes imaginatively the time of observation with one further qualification—the time of recreation is simultaneous with the time of observation. This is a process that Thoreau masters perfectly throughout his work. Moreover, as H. Daniel Peck suggests in the introduction to *A Year in Thoreau's Journal, 1851*, Thoreau's concern had been to chart his life in its continuity from past to present in direct reference to "nature's longest, most enduring patterns:"

> What was at stake for Thoreau was the continuity of experience, the sense of relation between past and present that constitutes a life. [...] By recording natural phenomena every day, and at every season, he would create a record of the natural past that, seen in relation to the present, would gradually chart nature's longest, most enduring patterns. (x, xv)

In this sense, Thoreau's work becomes more than an inventory of a boat trip replete with imaginary journeys in time. Starting with Lawrence Buell, critics have read *A*

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

Week as a transcendental anthology and as a commonplace catalogue comparable to Walt Whitman's collection of poems. More recently, however, noting that it is "conventionally praised for the precision of its location in space and time and for the symbolic national resonance of its recovery of local history," Meredith McGill argues that

> in *A Week*, Thoreau uses the placelessness of the commonplace to cultivate a disjunctive, not a continuous, relation to the past. Thoreau is interested in indifference to the past as well as in the work of historical recovery; his narrative registers both the violence of New England's history and the inevitability of its erasure. [...] Commonplacing as a cultural practice can be traced to the classical conception of topoi, rhetorical strategies designed to ensure that an orator always had enough to say about his topic. (359)

As commonplacing, catalogue rhetoric is a mode of cultural transmission and, arguably, a technology for time travel. It allows the orator to address simultaneously a variety of seemingly related topics. Land surveying is no different: as a catalogue of both natural and social spatial but also temporal formations, it can be seen both as a mode of cultural transmission of knowledge about property and topographical practices and as a technology for time travel according to the contours of properties and cadastral markers delineated in successive versions of surveying maps.

Thoreau compresses and collapses the time of experience and travel into the time of memory, which, in turn, in its written form constitutes an eternal and continuous present. If Thoreau's intention had been to improve time, as he points out in *Walden*, then the inevitable progression (improvement) one detects in the passing of time from the stage of experience to that of memory is visible in the culmination of a re-creating method through which he is able to capitalize literally on a past experience that shows its fruition in the present (continuous) moment, whose tyranny incorporates both past and future. Such a translation from experience to memory is similar to the translation/representation of improved land and landscape in the form of the surveying map.

Since the two rivers the brothers explore are best seen from above, the history and time Thoreau wants to record and recreate are best understood if contemplated from a continuous present moment, as if the author would be a perpetual stranger in a world he discovers constantly. The limit that Uncannunuc Mountain imposes on the brothers' trajectory in *A Week* is the center that offers them the "best view of the river itself." They floated on the river in the past and will float again in the future on their way back to Concord, and in doing so they survey the territory from all parts of the compass.

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

In "Tuesday," Thoreau delineates the other important trope of his enterprise: next to solid foundations, mountain tops represent both the end and limit of Thoreau's voyage and his privileged spot for investigation. Before the brothers climb Uncannunuc Mountain, the author presents an interlude about the ascent of Saddle-back Mountain: "I once saw the day break from the top of Saddle-back Mountain in Massachusetts, above the clouds" (180). Like the climb atop Wachusett, the climb on Saddle-back reinforces the promise of the west and offers a good spot for observation:

> In the preceding evening I had seen the summits of new and yet higher mountains, the Catskills, by which I might hope to climb to heaven again, and had set my compass for a fair lake in the southwest, which lay in my way, for which I now steered, descending the mountain by my own route, on the side opposite to that by which I had ascended, and soon found myself in the region of cloud and drizzling rain, and the inhabitants affirmed that it had been a cloudy and drizzling day wholly. (190)

A rehearsal for the culmination of *A Week*, the ascent on Uncannunuc, the climb on Saddleback positions Thoreau simultaneously on a stairway to heaven and on the map itself, since from there he can see the summits of "yet higher mountains, the Catskills." However, before he can investigate the west, he has his eyes set on the east, or north-east to be more precise:

> Uncannunuc Mountain in Goffstown was visible from Amoskeag, five or six miles westward. It is the north-easternmost in the horizon, which we see from our native town, but seen from there is too ethereally blue to be the same which the like of us have ever climbed. (255)

Visible not only from the Falls of Amoskeag situated on the Merrimack River but also from their native town on the horizon, Uncannunuc Mountain becomes the ultimate point of reference to the extent that everything becomes mapped in relation to it.

Although the proper place to conclude the voyage is never reached, imagination allows for the journey to be completed. If the port in New Hampshire, originally settled from Concord, Massachusetts, is never reached, the ecstatic moment of climbing Uncannunuc Mountain is attained even before the climbing itself. Whereas Sherman Paul sees a definite continuation between past and present which culminates into an ecstatic moment, Buell sees only an invitation to meditation, because as he puts it, "Transcendentalism recognizes [...] no continuity between past and present; and once the experience of ecstasy is past there is no knowing whether it can be recovered" (222).

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

As a case in point for his argument that does not deny the possibility of ecstasy, but trumps down its potential continuity as Paul seems to be suggesting, Buell offers the example of the anecdote Thoreau recounts in "Tuesday" about a hike up Mt. Greylock. Casting it as a "predawn meditation" that constitutes an episode like an "extra day to the week," Buell reads the ascent in the Romantic (Wordsworthean) tradition of a quest for the sacred and places ecstasy in a past moment that cannot be recovered. To back up his argument further, Buell notes, "Being past, [the ecstatic moment] is no longer accessible except to the imagination," and concludes, "It is ironic that the moment of intensest ecstasy does not take place during the week itself." But, as Paul implies, nor does it have to, since the moment of ecstasy is experienced at Walden Pond (306).

Furthermore, Buell relegates the potential of a transcendent experience, once Thoreau's narrative takes us to the top of the mountain, to a future moment of "further bliss." While he argues against continuity between past and present, at the same time Buell seems to be arguing for continuity between present and future by quoting a crucial Thoreauvian move: "As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days' journeys I might reach the region of eternal day" (189). It comes, then, as no surprise that only two days later, on the Thursday of their week, Thoreau climbs up another mountain (the limit and, therefore, the return point of their voyage) and adds up another episode the length of a week. But the limit that Uncannunc Mountain imposes on the trajectory of the two brothers is a limit they can always overcome, since it offers the "best view of the river itself."

In this sense, *A Week* posits the biographical in historical terms and sacrifices history in order to save biography, which he then uses as the individual basis for the reconstruction of a historical perspective that would reform the American Self:

> We should read history as little critically as we consider the landscape, and be more interested by the atmospheric tints and various lights and shades which the intervening spaces create, than by its groundwork and composition. It is the morning now turned evening and seen in the west,—the same sun, but a new light and atmosphere. Its beauty is like the sunset; not a fresco painting on a wall, flat and bounded, but atmospheric and roving or free. In reality, history fluctuates as the face of the landscape from morning to evening. What is of moment is its hue and color. Time hides no treasures; we want not its then, but its now. We do not complain that the mountains in the horizon are blue and indistinct; they are the more like the heavens. (153)

While Colonial Puritan America conceives history in typological terms and posits time on a preordained continuum in which the present time is of no consequence because it reiterates past biblical events and it predicts a future for the individual of

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

eternal salvation or damnation, antebellum America represents history in the making, and thus conflates past national accomplishments and failures and future economic promises in the expediency of a present moment. Simplifying things to the limit, what had once been preordained suddenly became expedient. On the one hand, history, and therefore time, had been made redundant; on the other, although momentous, history had been relegated to the caricature of great events, in which progress and technological innovation endanger, rather than improve, the fabric of the American Self.

In short, while the Puritans relate better to a prophetic time, Thoreau imagines a prospective time. In prophetic terms, the American Self is constructed in opposition to a present, therefore historic, time that posits the embodiment of the self in the afterlife of Puritan salvation (or damnation) and of American future history; in prospective terms, however, Thoreau, who lives in/the history projected by the Puritans, proposes to embrace the "tyranny of the present" in order to ground the afterlife of salvation and history within a present moment capable of reforming the American Self.

As Thoreau writes in pure transcendental fashion in the chapter "Wednesday," the world "is but canvas to our imaginations" (292). In *A Week*, Thoreau circumscribes the heights of the two mountains he climbed into the depth of Walden Pond. Drawing preponderantly on the biographical stance in which he remembers and writes about his and his brothers' adventure in a trance-like attitude after John died and Henry moved to Walden Pond, Sherman Paul offers us the necessary insight into Thoreau's contradictory writing process. Long before he embarked on his Kalendar project (a testimony of his need to write everything down in order to track the change of seasons, and, supposedly, to see whether he could not anticipate time), Paul suggests, Thoreau worked on perfecting the writing—therefore, (re)creating—technique he experimented with in *A Week*.

Lawrence Buell also considers Thoreau's imaginative transcendental sensibility, and his interpretation is similar to Sherman Paul's understanding of an ecstatic moment that can bridge past and present together. Both Paul and Buell emphasize the ecstatic character of Thoreau's writing of the voyage while at Walden Pond and consider that the recording or (re)creating part of the boat trip takes precedence over the trip itself. This disconnect between the time of experience and the time of writing becomes revelatory for Thoreau's problematic relationship with time.

Although he recognizes that Thoreau "manipulates the sense of time" (236), Buell nonetheless refuses to grant him the possibility to manipulate time itself. For Buell, *A Week* is catalogue rhetoric, the quintessential transcendental genre whose main ingredient is a collage of meditations, epiphanies, and various unexpected associations triggered by the author's encounter with and incursion within nature. Therefore, the sense of time is of little import, and, thus, it can be manipulated,

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

since the narrative gives "the impression of chronicling" not time itself, but the "succession of a sensitive mind's meditations in nature." The implication is clear: whatever happened happened; the past can be revisited and time can be reversed, but only in imagination. Thoreau might experience occasional epiphanies, but their experience cannot be recovered, as Buell argues in relation to the anecdotal reference to the climbing of Mt. Greylock/Saddle-back Mountain.

From the beginning of his exhaustive treatment of *A Week*, Buell relegates the disconnection between past and present to "the paradox of timelessness versus time" (209), which makes the critic consider the episode as "an extra day to the week." However, the extra day that Buell situates outside of time is nothing more and nothing less than Thoreau's destination on the mountain top: "As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days' journeys I might reach the region of eternal day" (189). By contrast, faced himself with Thoreau's time versus timelessness contradiction, Paul does not quibble when it comes to cutting down some of the days of *A Week*, albeit for different reasons. As Buell notes, Paul does not continue his analysis past Tuesday, nor, I would argue, does he have to. While Buell feels the need to add an extra day to the week, Paul considers it appropriate to cut the week short; while the former finds the episode too anecdotal, the other believes it to be the epitome of the whole week, revealing Thoreau's quest for inspiration and spiritual becoming. The episode that leads Thoreau to "the region of the eternal day" might have been a simple epiphany in Buell's estimation; however, the same episode is nothing less than ecstasy in Paul's.

I would argue, therefore, that the interval between epiphany and ecstasy gives the full extent of Thoreau's experimentation with time and, consequently, with space, because, according to Paul's view, *A Week* is "an extended Sabbath devoted to a voyage to the headwaters of inspiration" (220), whereas the voyage itself is reinscribed into the "rolled map" that studies the landscape "by degree." Unlike Buell, who adds an extra day to the week, Paul extends a particular day to the length of a week. The fact that Thoreau's week had been two weeks does not prevent Paul from emphasizing no more than three days. Reading *A Week* as a first draft of *Walden*, and consequently discussing them together, Paul moves constantly between the two books, with copious references to the journal as well, because he considers Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond an ecstatic period, a perpetual Sabbath, a happy time in the author's life, when his communion with nature (re)presented the best that his own genius had to offer.

Paul disregards the formal arrangement of *A Week* and posits Sunday as the starting point of Thoreau's spiritual voyage. This voyage had a threefold destination (inspiration, organic life, and quest for being) and conveniently covered the thematic range of the "continuing narrative of Thoreau's life" as represented in his work. In short, for Paul, the voyage John and Henry took on the Concord and

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

Merrimack rivers inspired the latter to move to Walden Pond in order to live an organic life and write his books in a quest for being. Thus, Walden Pond becomes the natural place for/of "liberation," the place for renewal, ecstasy, and idealized recollection; similarly, Thoreau's stay at the pond becomes the period of "the richest fulfillment of his life" (193), not only a point in time when he memorialized his brother, but also a point in space, a center, that the author revisited constantly from the decaying period of his later life.

Walden proposes the same topology as *A Week*, but with a twist. While the temporal paradigm remains somewhat the same, the topography changes completely. Now, the movement (up and down the Concord and Merrimack rivers or up and down Greylock/Saddle-back and Uncannunc mountains) comes to a halt or becomes restricted to a limited territory, namely Thoreau's perambulations in the woods surrounding Walden Pond and his occasional boat rides on the pond itself. The linear, yet tortuous, progression (and regression, for Henry and John row back to Concord once they descend Uncannunc Mountain) from *A Week* becomes re-inscribed in the author's walks around the pond or in his outings across it, and, therefore, the "stream" of time he goes "a-fishing in" is no longer a river, but a pond. Walden Pond and *Walden* become the limit of Thoreau's voyage, and the surveying map becomes the measure of his accomplishment.

The top of Mount Uncannunuc he climbs with his brother in *A Week* offers Thoreau a point of reference and of observation. The bird's eye panoramic perspective afforded by the ascent on the mountain top is literally the opposite of Walden Pond's recovered bottom. But mapping them both permits Thoreau to get closer to the primitive and the wild whose surveying he later performs in an essay such as "Walking." When he writes in the last chapter of *Walden*, "We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface, nor leaped as many above it. We know not where we are" (332), Thoreau suggests that land surveying not only allows one to find one's bearings but also be acquainted with the world in which one lives. In order to prove that, he also climbed a few mountains only to find, as he writes in *A Week*, that "every visit to [the] summit would […] generalize the particular information gained below" (119).

References

Buell, Lawrence. 1973. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Johnson, Linck C. 1986. *Thoreau's Complex Weave¸ The Writing of* A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia.

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)

McGill, Meredith L. 2007. "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*." *American Literary History* 19.2: 357-374.

Paul, Sherman. 1958. *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1993. *A Year In Thoreau's Journal: 1851*. In H. Daniel Peck (ed.). New York: Penguin.

--------. 1958. *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau*. In Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Eds.). New York: New York University Press.

--------. 1971. *Walden*. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

--------. 1980. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. In Carl F. Hivde et al. Princeton (Eds.). NJ: Princeton University Press.

BDD-A24814 © 2016 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:46:08 UTC)