

Living Poems in Thoreau's Prose

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In November 1841, a young Henry David Thoreau set out for the Harvard Library to gather materials for a poetry anthology that he hoped might become his first book. Many of the texts he consulted were not unlike our anthologies today – tools for study that compile poems under themes, perhaps for the sake of history, to document a certain genre, school, or movement.¹ But after spending time in the poetry section of the library, Thoreau grew frustrated with these volumes and the academic methods of collecting and studying poetry and began to question the design of his own project:

When looking over the dry and dusty volumes of the English poets, I cannot believe that those fresh and fair creations I had imagined are contained in them. English poetry from Gower down collected into one alcove – and so from the library window compared with the commonest nature seems very mean.

Poetry cannot breath in the scholar's atmosphere. [...] while I am running over the catalogue, and collating and selecting – I think if it would not be a shorter way to a complete volume – to step at once into the field or wood, with a very low reverence to students and librarians.
(*Journal* 1:337-38)

Thoreau draws from a trope of natural science to explain his thinking: what he finds in the library is the literary equivalent of taxidermy, where poems are captured and “collected” in “dry and dusty” containers, killed – they “cannot breathe” – and fixed to a page like specimens pinned beneath glass.

His metaphor and his misgivings are echoed in a later journal entry where he directly condemns such “embalming” as practiced in the natural history museums of his day (*Journal* 2:79). He explains that the process of preservation disrupts and falsifies natural objects; it would be best to visit the artifacts where they originate: “Where is the proper Herbarium – the true cabinet of shells – and Museum of skeletons – but in the meadow where the flower bloomed – by the sea side where the tide cast up the fish – and on the hills and in the vallies where the beast laid down its life – and the skeleton of the traveller reposes on the grass” (78). Indeed, Thoreau’s qualms about the museum and its artifacts are paralleled by his doubts about the library and its anthologies, and what he makes plain about plants and mollusks in the later journal entry – that to properly observe and appreciate them, one must visit them in their native habitats – he intuitively about poetry in the earlier one. Thus, in both cases, Thoreau calls for the same thing: to understand the items under observation, one must return to the “meadow,” “vallies,” “field or wood,” the places these objects belong. Certainly, in this example, the skeletons and shells are lifeless objects, whether in the museum or in nature, and poetry need not adhere to the same laws of life and death. Yet this very distinction – the fact that poems are lifelike yet escape biological aging – will only increase in importance to Thoreau as he develops the concept, still nascent here, that poems emerge from their surrounding world, existing and interrelating within an organic system as intricately as living organism in a natural ecology.

What the library and scholarly anthologies could not represent was poetry’s dynamic, lifelike force. This is the point Thoreau teases out of the journal entry when he revises it for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the book he undertook to write after abandoning the anthology project, the narrative of a two-week boat trip Thoreau took with his brother, John, in fall 1839, three years before John’s sudden death:

When I stand in a library where is all the recorded wit of the world, but none of the recording, a mere accumulated, and not truly cumulative treasure, where immortal works stand side by side with anthologies which did not survive

their month, and cobweb and mildew have already spread from these to the binding of those; and happily I am reminded of what poetry is, I perceive that Shakspeare and Milton did not foresee into what company they were to fall. Alas! that so soon the work of a true poet should be swept into such a dust-hole! (341)

Rephrased using the lexicon of literature and composition, Thoreau's library critique now anticipates an alternative type of poetry collection: instead of merely reprinting the poems, an anthology might reflect their "recording," the birth-like process of each poem's history of inspiration and invention. Then, too, this anthology would pay homage to the "cumulative" vitality and ongoing legacy of a poem and poetry in general: the power of a poem to unfold meaning beyond the conditions of its writing and a first reading or, more broadly, the collective conversations between poems through time and their legacies of influence and affect, like an ecosystem of English language poetry. Thus, poems by Shakespeare and Milton would not merely be "accumulated" alongside those of minor poets, as if only to complete the record of history, but would be recognized respective to their magnitude of influence on future generations. Of course, this new kind of anthology is hardly feasible on such a comprehensive scale. Thoreau would have struggled to acquire the complex histories and far-reaching futures of the poems, even those by such well-known figures as Shakespeare and Milton.

It is easy to see why Thoreau abandoned such an ambitious project, as he did in early 1844. But soon after he set his plans aside, Thoreau began to work seriously on *A Week*, where more than just the library experience would develop and mature, including Thoreau's ideas about poetry.² Like a palimpsest, *A Week* bears evidence of its predecessor even as it builds on it: Thoreau incorporates excerpts from his research – from work by Milton, Chaucer, Ossian, Homer, and more – into arguments about the poets, which themselves grow from literary criticism that he wrote in tandem with his studies – "Aulus Persius Flaccus" (1840), "Homer. Ossian. Chaucer" (1843), "Sir Walter Raleigh," (1843), and "Anacreon" (1843).

Illustrating and exemplifying his ideas about poetry are over sixty of Thoreau's own poems. Many of these are extracted from journals or *Dial* publications that were contemporaneous with his work on the poetry anthology; many are revised for *A Week*, and all – as with the excerpts from other poets and literary essays – are meticulously interwoven into the meditations and reflections of the book. The result is that Thoreau's poems, along with his thoughts about poets and poetry, comprise an inextricable strand of what Linck Johnson calls *A Week*'s "complex weave" (xii). What Thoreau failed to do in the anthology, he was able to do – and more – in *A Week*, which Robert O. Evans accurately describes as Thoreau's "poetic manifesto" (43).

A Week's debt to Thoreau's early work on poetry has been well documented by critics on all counts except with regard to the influence of Thoreau's own embedded poetry.³ Although their sheer number should make them hard to overlook, Thoreau's poems have long been disregarded in the major studies of *A Week*, where they have been called digressions, explications, or mere ornaments to the prose.⁴ That critics have largely neglected these poems – and Thoreau's poetry in general – reflects a critical consensus that the poems are, at best, inconsistent in quality and, at worst, bad writing. Emerson skirted the question of quality in his eulogy when he averred that Thoreau's "biography is in his verses," training ground for his mature ideas and prose style, a tepid commendation that set Thoreau's future poetry critics on the path of biographical criticism (408).⁵ Focusing on Thoreau's development as a writer, these critics have illuminated the older writer's prose innovations by comparing them with the young Thoreau's experiments in poetry. But the attention to early poems has narrowed the focus to pre-*Week* poetry, and this perpetuates a tendency to overlook most of the poems in *A Week* or after *A Week*, especially those that underwent extensive revision when incorporated into prose. A few poetry critics, most notably Robert O. Evans and Elizabeth Hall Witherell, call attention to the interactions between Thoreau's poetry and prose in *A Week*, *Walden*, and throughout Thoreau's journals.⁶ But even as they focus on poems, these critics primarily identify discrete

themes and subjects or styles and formal strategies in the poems and relegate them to a supporting role in hybrid texts. Reading *A Week* for either poems or prose alone leaves unexamined the dialogue between the two, the subtle shifts in register from poetic speaker to prose narrator that connote his internal debates – thoughts Thoreau questions even as he presents them – as well as debates about genre within the structure of *A Week* as the timeless insights of the poems often stand out against the time-bound two-week boat trip. Further, ignoring the integration of the poems into *A Week* leads us to overlook a major component of its complex compositional history. Tracking these poems from journal, to *Dial*, to *A Week* reveals that Thoreau often altered the meaning of poems during the editing process. Analyzing the same poem in multiple contexts exposes how it creates meaning by itself and in relation to its surroundings as different contexts encourage disparate interpretations of a poem.

Confronting the formal hybridity of Thoreau's poems within the *Week's* prose demands strategies for reading the poetry and prose as well as for interpreting their interactions. I argue that reading the dialogue between Thoreau's poems and prose yields a depiction of poetry as something akin to a biological process, albeit one that exceeds the rules of nature and especially the inevitability of death. The book posits "life" stories of Thoreau's poems: as the poet himself, Thoreau is privy to the "recording" and reverberations of his own lyrics within his own life, and he is able to follow his own alternative anthology notion, tracing poems from inspiration and inception, to printed words, to reprinted and recalled words, forces that outlast their author. In a book about significant loss, a poem's immortality matters even more in concept than it does in fact. The narrative of the journey – with its beginning, middle, and end – employs plot structure to commemorate the course of a life, John's life, now ended, but the poems try to elude that temporality: like Thoreau's prose narrator, the poems voice ideas and concepts, but they do not participate in the action of the journey; they are displaced from the river context. Exterior to the narrative yet embedded within it, the lyrics and their insights are at once implicated in the story yet distinct from it. Even as these poems

escape the *Week* narrative's portrayal of time's inevitable losses, they function as a consoling force in the face of that loss within the narrative. Narrating the lives of poems may paradoxically fix them in the teleology of the excursion, but these lyrics nevertheless effect a more supple narration, a story that troubles notions of death and ending, life, and representation.

Thus, Thoreau's living poems start with the poet, the conduit of new poems, yet the force of poetry is omnipresent and outside of human time. In *A Week*, the poet is described as a genius with abilities that average men lack: "What merely quickens or retards the blood in their veins and fills their afternoons with pleasure they know not whence, conveys a distinct assurance to the finer organization of the poet" (341). Yet the poet's "finer organization" is more the ability to channel poetic inspiration than to apply his own aesthetic talent and skill: "When the poet is most inspired, is stimulated by an *aura* which never even colors the afternoons of common men, then his talent is all gone, and he is no longer a poet" (342). Inspiration is a transient gift; it is not earned or even kept. Indeed, if poets can do little to obtain inspiration, they also can do nothing to control it. Thoreau's inspired poet has the creative capacity of a chicken hunting down grubs: "we run and scratch with our pen, intent only on worms [...] delighting in the dust we make, but do not detect where the jewel lies, which, perhaps, we have in the mean time cast to a distance, or quite covered up again." The jewel-like poems that result from inspiration are happy accidents in the poet's hands. But, paradoxically, because the poet had little to do with their production in the first place, the poems are capable of bearing meaning beyond the poet's life: "Poetry is so universally true and independent of experience, that it does not need any particular biography to illustrate it," Thoreau explains (95). Writing a poem releases it from the biographical circumstances of one person's life and gives it an existence that exceeds a human time frame, as Thoreau suggests with a quote from Philip James Bailey's *Festus*, "His song outlives/ Time, tower, and god, – all that then was save Heaven."

A Week illustrates the inspiration that produces a poem and the early stages of its recording process by depicting poems emerging typographically from prose, much as the jewel becomes visible through dust. Take, for example, paragraph two of "Wednesday," which describes a bittern taking flight (235). As a poem just beginning to take shape, the poetic qualities of the bittern sentence are easily overlooked. Hidden in a paragraph of prose, its rhyme could be lost on many readers: "Now away he goes, with a limping flight, uncertain where he will alight, until a rod of clear sand amid the alders invites his feet; and now our steady approach compels him to seek a new retreat." The sentence could have been broken into lines to draw attention to the rhymes, perhaps like this:

Now away he goes,	<i>a</i>
with a limping flight,	<i>b</i>
uncertain where he will alight,	<i>b</i>
until a rod of clear sand amid the alders invites	<i>b</i>
his feet;	<i>c</i>
and now our steady approach compels him to seek a new retreat.	<i>c</i>

By remaining embedded in the prose, however, the sentence enacts a poem working to break free from prose but losing track of its rhyme and meter in the driving course of the narrative and struggling against the trajectory of the text. The poem's efforts are matched by the bittern's, who struggles to gain flight, then struggles to land, only to be scared away again as the travelers draw near – so the poet's unwitting approach scares away the elusive poem, the text seems to admonish. Even though Thoreau can only look sidelong at the bittern, the bittern's contemplative observations inspire his own; Thoreau imagines that simply looking into the bittern's eyes would teach him much – "One wonders if, by its patient study by rocks and sandy capes, it has wrested the whole of her secret from Nature yet. [...] It would be worth the while to look closely into the eye which has been open and seeing at such hours, and in such solitudes, its dull yellowish, greenish eye" (246). Thus, he may not gain "the whole of her secret from Nature," but his glimpse of the bird prompts him to wonder after those secrets. So the poem, too, though only half-visible in prose, still

has an effect on those who discern it, drawing our attention to the sounds and textures of Thoreau's language just as the bittern draws Thoreau's attention to the contours of its environment and the hue of its eye.

Since even this partial, emergent poem sends tremors through the text, how much more might a finished poem affect it? Thoreau postulates that, at its best, a poem can have an impact that far exceeds even its finished form, a force he identifies as the "true poem." Thoreau's theory of the true poem is based on the Platonic idea that a poem is comprised of a "form" – its shape, size, and conventional features such as rhyme and meter – and "substance," which, to Thoreau, consists of its wisdom (91). It follows that if a lyric's substance is distinct from its form, then the idea of the poem may exist beyond its written shape. Thus, "The true poem is not that which the public read" but something separate from the printed poem (343). This notion runs parallel to the idea that a human soul may exist beyond its lifeless body, and Thoreau's true poem is indeed a ghostly and nebulous literary spirit: evident "by the atmosphere which surrounds it," "true verses come toward us indistinctly, as the very breath of all friendliness, and envelope us in their spirit and fragrance" (374).⁷

The concept of an eternal poetic force is obviously attractive to someone grieving the loss of a brother's life, but Thoreau nevertheless struggles to make an absolute distinction between a physical poem and a true poem. Even as he insists that the true poem is separate from its written form, he ironically turns to the lexicon of the printing press – specifically, the stereotyping process – to describe it: "There is always a poem not printed on paper, coincident with the production of this, stereotyped in the poet's life. It is *what he has become through his work*. Not how is the idea expressed in stone, or on canvass or paper, is the question, but how far it has obtained form and expression in the life of the artist" (343). Here, the poem's effect on the poet is compared to the process of making a metal copy – the "stereotype" – of an original typeset "forme" of a text, the plate assembled for printing. The stereotype was cast as a substitute for the forme, to avoid wear to the individual metal "types" (the individual letters or symbols) in the forme and to facilitate future reprints of a text while

freeing the pieces of type for other uses. To say that a text was "stereotyped" was to say that a cast had been made of the forme, a copy cast for reprinting the text. Yet "stereotyped" was also used to describe the printed product, to differentiate books made with the original forme from those made with the stereotype, an important distinction since stereotypes were susceptible to errors not present in the original forme.⁸ While the stereotype "life" seems to figure the true poem in a form less material than stone, canvas, or paper, it nevertheless offers an adamantly textual language for a true poem that is hardly disembodied, a poem, however ideal or abstract, that Thoreau cannot seem to picture apart from its written reproduction.

As if to explore this ambiguous relationship between poet, poem, and true poem, Thoreau animates the prose discussion of the true poem with two poems that respond to this passage and then to each other: first, the couplet beginning "My life has been the poem I would have writ," followed by "The Poet's Delay" (343). Together, these poems and prose create a textual sequence that replicates a sequence of thought in which the writer is literally affected by his poems appearing on the page. Each shift between texts introduces a new perspective as narrator and poetic speakers take part in a dialogue staged in poems and prose. Encapsulating positions in poems allows Thoreau to distinguish them from each other and from the prose and, thus, observe their effect. Still, each interjecting voice is circumscribed within the *Week* writer's thought process, part of an internal debate probing the question of how poems affect poets and what a poet may "become through his work."

Like much of *A Week*, these poems were, in fact, composed at an earlier date – both appear in Thoreau's journal, and "Poet's Delay" is also in the *Dial*.⁹ By including them here, it is as if Thoreau, as poet-stereotype, is reprinting and experiencing them anew in conversation with each other. Playing the poems against each other results in revisions. For example, in the *Week* version of the couplet "My life has been the poem," the second line has been shortened from "But I could not both live and live to utter it" to "But I could not both live and utter it" (*Journal* 1:324, *Week* 343). For "Poet's Delay," the *Week* version is a replica of the *Dial* version, but both

of these are different from the journal version. The journal “Poet’s Delay” is untitled, it begins with a stanza corresponding to Thoreau’s age at the original moment of composition – “Two years and twenty now have flown” – and includes a fourth stanza describing a sparrow building her nest (*Journal* 1:116). In the *Dial* and *A Week*, these first and fourth stanzas are removed, what was the third stanza becomes the first, and the title is given. Together on the pages of *A Week*, the sequence looks like this: “His true work will not stand in any prince’s gallery,” the prose asserts, then,

My life has been the poem I would have writ,
But I could not both live and utter it.

THE POET’S DELAY.

In vain I see the morning rise,
In vain observe the western blaze,
Who idly look to other skies,
Expecting life by other ways.

Amidst such boundless wealth without,
I only still am poor within,
The birds have sung their summer out,
But still my spring does not begin.

Shall I then wait the autumn wind,
Compelled to seek a milder day,
And leave no curious nest behind,
No woods still echoing to my lay? (343)

Proximity draws these poems and their compositional histories into a complicated conversation that I will discuss by considering what these poems mean both within and without the prose context. Without this context, the opening couplet could be taken as a justification for not writing poetry at all: it is difficult both to live well and write well, so one should focus on living well, it seems to argue. Certainly “My life has been the poem” implies that one’s life can be constructed to convey meaning

and exhibit beauty much as poems do, so living well is at least as good as writing well – or so the couplet logic goes. In this way, the couplet appears to clarify the prose description of the true poem by asserting that a meaningful life can be a poetic expression without a written poem of any kind.

It is tempting to map the couplet onto Thoreau's biography and read it as his excuse for not writing more poems, an admission loosely paraphrased, *I could not live well and write poems well, so I chose to live well*. It is true that, elsewhere, *A Week* supports the idea that a great life may not allow one the time to write great poems. In "Concord River," for example, Thoreau admires the men of New England whose daily labor builds wisdom more profound than that of the great poets but whose dedication to work allows no time for poetry: "Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper" (8). If we read the couplet's speaker as one of these men, then the biographical interpretation seems to fit. But if we read the speaker as Thoreau rather than a laborer, as the sequence on the page invites us to do, we must admit that as much as Thoreau lauds the farmers, he does not see himself as one of them. He advocates for physical work such as theirs as the proper training and experience for poets, but he never suggests that poets should abandon creative labor. Rather, he asserts that poetry should come from a life that balances mind and body.¹⁰ Indeed, however vague Thoreau's concept of the true poem may be, it maintains that writing poems is a valuable part of living well: writing poems releases true poems that in turn promote personal growth. Although the couplet says that the speaker could not both "live and utter" a poem, *A Week* says otherwise, both in its prose discussions of the role of the poet and in its poems, which play a vital role in the *life* of the narrator. In this light, revisions between the *Week* version and journal version of the couplet are telling as they only deepen the couplet's ironies: removing "live to" makes these two lines identical in rhythm and length, formal agreement that matches the harmony between writing and living that *A Week* represents.

If instead of reading the couplet as an excuse, we read it as part of a debate with the prose – *do I need to write poems in order to live my life well?* – then “The Poet’s Delay” stages its opposite: *do I need to live well in order to write?* Thus, the second poem enters the debate by taking a different tack, tacitly suggesting that the couplet is asking the wrong question. In “Delay,” the poet struggles to write and wonders if his “delay” is due to his inability to connect with the natural world. He has been trying to live by the direction of “other skies” – the guidance of a transcendent faith – but he acknowledges that privileging the ideal over the material world has proven fruitless. Meanwhile, the natural world has nearly passed him by: it is almost fall, but the poet has not even begun his creative “spring.” The poet worries that he’s lost the opportunity to live or write. Looking to birds as an example, he imagines what he could be if he would take part in the natural world. By comparing himself to birds and poems to birdsong, the speaker realizes that writing is a natural component of a life lived fully for poets just as singing is synonymous with living for birds. “The birds have sung their summer out,” he observes, suggesting that singing has allowed the birds to fulfill their existence, yet “still my spring does not begin” – in other words, by not writing poems, the poet has been unable to begin living. Realizing that living well is, for him, defined by writing well, the speaker nearly despairs of his life by the poem’s end and wonders if the spring and summer of a productive existence are lost, leaving him with “no curious nest” or “echoing lay” to leave behind – symbols for life and poetry. No answer is explicitly offered in the poem; it ends with its question. Yet the fact that this discussion is itself a poem – the product of its poet’s response to the birdsong and sunset skies of the natural world – suggests that he has not given up on life but has chosen to live his life by writing. Further, reprinting the *Dial* version of the poem signals a specific moment when Thoreau himself made the choice to pursue writing and publishing poems. Indeed, “Poet’s Delay” is a poem that grew and changed as its poet matured, a symbol of writing as a process of living, for to publish “Poet’s Delay” in the 1842 *Dial*, Thoreau revisited the 1840 journal draft and refashioned it from a personal expression of his

frustrations at age twenty-two to a general inquiry into the nature of art and productivity. Of course, Thoreau's definitive answer to the *Week* debate about living and writing is *A Week* itself, the product of a life lived well by writing, which Carl Hovde describes as Thoreau's ultimate "curious nest."¹¹

As if satisfied with these implicit resolutions, the prose following these poems moves on from the conversation and returns to the narrative of the boat trip, shifting from the "other skies" of "Delay" to the skies of the book's present moment. The narrator must be looking up and at the world around him to describe the stormy weather: "This raw and gusty day, and the creaking of the oaks and pines on shore, reminded us of more northern climes than Greece, and more wintry seas than the Ægean" (343). Leaving the abstract meditation on the true poem, the text will pivot to thoughts of Scotland and a consideration of Ossian's particular poetry, but the change of topic is bridged by a return to the landscape of the immediate journey. It is as if revisiting these poems has allowed the narrator to connect with the natural world and begin to live, which for him is to continue to read and write.

If the bittern poem represents the early stages of lyric inspiration and formation, and the true poem sequence illustrates the effect of lyrics on the speaker's life, the poem "Sic Vita" shows how poems evade chronological time and "live" in a way that exceeds our limited bounding of mortality and immortality (383-84). Indeed, this is the poem's very subject: Thoreau posits a haphazard bouquet of flowers as a conceit for the speaker's otherworldly thoughts and aspirations that, like the flowers, are separated from "roots" that must have inspired and formed them. "Sic Vita" – loosely translated, "such is life" – dates to well before *A Week*, supporting the idea that the poem itself exists beyond the book's narrative frame.¹² *A Week* lets Thoreau revisit "Sic Vita" by inserting it amid prose that leads to interpretations not immediately evident in the *Dial* version, revitalizing the poem.

The *Week* version of the poem starts where all poetry originates in *A Week*: from a force of inspiration. In place of the poem's title from the

Dial, prose now introduces the poem with a brief anecdote about another bouquet of violets. The poem follows, as if emerging organically from the imagery in the prose:

It is but thin soil where we stand; I have felt my roots in a
richer ere this. I have seen a bunch of violets in a glass
vase, tied loosely with a straw, which reminded me of
myself. –

I am a parcel of vain strivings tied
By a chance bond together,
Dangling this way and that, their links
Were made so loose and wide,
Methinks,
For milder weather.

A bunch of violets without their roots,
And sorrel intermixed,
Encircled by a wisp of straw
Once coiled about their shoots,
The law
By which I'm fixed.

A nosegay which Time clutched from out
Those fair Elysian fields,
With weeds and broken stems, in haste,
Doth make the rabble rout
That waste
The day he yields.

And here I bloom for a short hour unseen,
Drinking my juices up,
With no root in the land
To keep my branches green,

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But stand
In a bare cup.

Some tender buds were left upon my stem
In mimicry of life,
But ah! the children will not know,
Till time has withered them,
The woe,
With which they're rife. (383-84)

Using the conceit of the bouquet, the speaker imagines the "richer" soil that formed him: he describes his origins as a paradisiacal Elysium from which "Time" "clutched" him, removing him from the source of his life, to "bloom for a short hour unseen" "in a bare cup," a metaphor for life on earth. While the poem offers some comfort for the speaker simply through its allegorical explanation of unfulfilled hopes and dreams, the picture it paints of life on earth is grim, and the poem's conclusion is a half-hearted attempt at consolation:

But now I see I was not plucked for naught,
And after in life's vase
Of glass set while I might survive,
But by a kind hand brought
Alive
To a strange place.

That stock thus thinned will soon redeem its hours,
And by another year,
Such as God knows, with freer air,
More fruit and fairer flowers
Will bear,
While I droop here.

Life's not "for naught," and the speaker's uprooting is even called "kind," but the poem does not spell out any benefit to the speaker; instead, the

boon goes to the future of “another year,” presumably in Elysium, while the speaker is left to “droop here.” But if life is like a dying bouquet, then there is little hope for future generations, either, since they would presumably face the same fate. Richard Bridgman also notes the incongruity between stems first gathered “in haste” and later described as “thinned”: only the latter connotes the comfort of design and intention, while the former is chillingly random (23). Bridgman concludes that the image of the thinned flowers is a “fable of productive sacrifice” inserted in an otherwise despondent poem that offers a “formal but distinctly unsatisfactory conclusion.”

For the “Sic Vita” of the July 1841 *Dial*, Bridgman’s reading rings true. But while the poem alone struggles to find solace in its resolution, its very struggle participates in a resolution encompassed in the poem and prose of this section in *A Week*. The poem is couched amid prose that discusses the possibility of something beyond the apparent world and its established answers to life’s mysteries. The narration encourages us toward the challenging work of looking past the surface of the physical world: “It is easier to discover another such a new world as Columbus did, than to go within one fold of this which we appear to know so well” (383). The poem itself follows a string of exhortations from the narrator, directing us to avoid attaching ourselves to what little we understand of the present world but to strive toward what we cannot see. Coming next, the poem illustrates the complicated push-and-pull of resisting physical yearnings while pursuing intangible ones. Beyond the poem, as the narrator probes possible ways to describe the inscrutable world he imagines, he hypothesizes a world within the present that is beyond our limited understanding of it, something more complex than an afterlife or an alternative universe but that may yet be realized: “I am not without hope that we may, even here and now, obtain some accurate information concerning that OTHER WORLD which the instinct of mankind has so long predicted” (385). The capitalization suggests the magnitude of the other world as well as the importance of this idea to the narrator. It is an extension of our world – “We live on the outskirts of that region,” – and thus, nearby, it is something that we can grow to

understand: "We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon, and stars" (383, 385). But though Thoreau's other world is more than just an afterlife, it still offers the consolation of life after the death of a physical body, as he illustrates at the end of this section with stanzas from Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island* and quotations from Hafiz and Dowlat Shah that describe individuals escaping mortal time by leaving physical bodies behind and continuing on as immortal souls (388).

This version of immortality offers another way to read "Sic Vita": the thinning of the flowers may not benefit future earthly generations but rather a future version of the speaker himself, as if the roots preserved the essence of the speaker. If this solution seems unorthodox and far-fetched, it nonetheless exemplifies the sort of imaginative and expansive thinking Thoreau calls for in the passage and carries out through the interweaving of poetry and prose. Indeed, the poem invites us to indulge our "vain strivings" – they are as lovely as violets, after all – even while it seeks to rationalize them. The poem's imagery suggests that any limits placed on these impulses in the everyday world may be worth challenging, too: the "law" which binds the violets is no more than a "straw." Likewise, the carefully shaped stanzas – with a contracted or "tied" penultimate line – call attention to the construction of this particular poem, as if its stanzaic structure is the law of its figure.

By inviting us to look beyond the constrained form of "Sic Vita" for another explanation of its perplexing final stanza, this poem makes us look beyond one world toward that "other world" Thoreau envisions in "Friday." It is fitting that the prose discussion of the other world is what redeems the *Week* version of "Sic Vita" from the struggle of its *Dial* incarnation: set amid the narration of Thoreau's consciousness in response to the surrounding world, it is as if the poem has been reborn from the "thinned stock" of its own source of inspiration, as if the specimen poem has been returned to its natural habitat. Thus, it is not only a desire to exceed death that drives Thoreau to devise the true poem as an eternal force but also a wish to show something eternal among the living.

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Notes

I am extremely grateful to Karen J. Ford, Rochelle Johnson, William Rossi, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell for their incisive and gracious comments on this essay.

¹ For the history of Thoreau's work on the poetry anthology, see Robert Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets." Sattelmeyer lists several anthologies Thoreau withdrew during his work on the poetry project, like the editions of traditional and broadside ballads from collectors Thomas Percy, J. Payne Collier, and Thomas Evans of the early eighteenth century, popular anthologies of their day that, as Thoreau later predicts, eventually fell out of fashion and out of print (251).

² According to Linck Johnson, Thoreau considered writing about the 1839 river journey as early as 1840, but he did not envision a book-length work until 1842, and he did not work seriously on the project until 1844 ("A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" 42-44). Both Johnson and Robert Sattelmeyer offer evidence that Thoreau was actively planning *A Week* during the fall of 1844, and Johnson dates the completion of the first draft of *A Week* to fall 1845 (*Thoreau's Complex Weave* 267-70, *Journal* 1:611-12).

³ Linck Johnson's "Literary Tradition" from *Thoreau's Complex Weave* is the most comprehensive assessment of the interpolated poetry texts. Meredith McGill's study, "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*," finds that the fragments of other writers' poems in *A Week* promote a "disjunctive" relationship with the past that is at odds with narrative progress (358). In both cases, the focus on other poets' works and Thoreau's literary analyses precludes extensive consideration of Thoreau's own poetry.

⁴ Lawrence Buell in *Literary Transcendentalism*, for example, categorizes the poems as "digressions," although his analysis offers perceptive interpretations of some of the poems in *A Week* (210).

⁵ Elizabeth Hall Witherell's essay, "Thoreau's Watershed Season as Poet," demonstrates the insights gained from using Thoreau's poetry to understand

his biography. On the question of artistic skill in Thoreau's poetry, Witherell is less ambivalent than Emerson: "The assessment of Thoreau's poetic talent as a minor one is so widely shared and so obviously correct that critics and biographers generally treat his poetry in relation to some larger issue in his life or work" (49). When she analyzes a group of poems Thoreau wrote mid-1841, Witherell locates nascent versions of Thoreau's major themes, such as the significance of human presence within a natural world, as well as early evidence of his colloquial prose style to prove her point that these efforts at verse are "relics of the apprenticeship of a master of poetic prose" (62).

⁶ Robert O. Evans' essay, "Thoreau's Poetry and Prose Works," is the first and most extensive treatment of the embedded poetry in Thoreau's prose. Though Evans argues that the combination of poetry and prose is an important framework for *A Week*, he rarely goes beyond cataloging each poem's discrete role in the prose and does not account for poetry's role as a primary *Week* genre. Elizabeth Hall Witherell's essay "Thoreau as Poet," an overview of Thoreau's poetry career, mentions "the pattern of interaction between prose and poetry" that starts in Thoreau's Spring 1841 journal and continues through his later career (62). She notes that the *Week* poems "resonate with and enhance" the prose, "while the prose extends and explicates the poetry" (66). My analysis is indebted to Evans' and Witherell's provocative observations.

⁷ Thoreau clarifies that not all poetic substances are immortal: "There are two classes of men called poets," and there are likewise two kinds of poems, "one that of genius, or the inspired, the other of intellect and taste, in the intervals of inspiration" (375). Poems of the latter kind may be well-written, but only the former contain eternal truth; both are "great and rare," but only an inspired poem "vibrates and pulsates with life forever," an enduring force that cannot be lost (375). Thoreau certainly aspired to write inspired, immortal verse.

⁸ For a description and history of the stereotype process, see Thomas Hodgson, *An Essay on the Origin and Process of Stereotype Printing*. Hodgson discusses the potential for errors in stereotype printing on pages 158-78.

⁹ An earlier version of “My life has been the poem” is in *Journal 1*, 28 August 1841 (324). “The Poet’s Delay” is also in *Journal 1*, between the entries of 8 March 1840 and 16 March 1840 (116-17). “The Poet’s Delay” was also printed in the *Dial*, October 1842.

¹⁰ *A Week*’s “Sunday” chapter, pages 105-8, offers a full discussion of how manual labor should undergird poetic and scholarly labor. Thoreau suggests that physical work can improve writing: “steady labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, is unquestionably the best method of removing palaver and sentimentality out of one’s style, both of speaking and writing” (105). But even though Thoreau admires the working class, he does not believe that poets should work with their hands only. Rather, he advocates for a balanced life that keeps poets in touch with the world outside the mind: “Surely the writer is to address a world of laborers, and such therefore must be his own discipline. [...] Indeed, the mind never makes a great and successful effort without a corresponding energy of the body” (106).

¹¹ Similarly, Thoreau ends *A Week* by comparing his book with another nest, the mud nest of the Chinese cliff swallow, corroboration for Carl Hovde’s suggestion that *A Week* is itself another “curious nest” Thoreau left behind, one the writer humbly depicts as mere layers of mud, feathered “with the froth” (500, 393).

¹² According to legend, a college-age Thoreau wrote “Sic Vita” for Emerson’s sister-in-law, Lucy Jackson Brown, and delivered it to her by attaching it to a bouquet of violets and tossing the whole parcel through her window. Thoreau’s biographers Henry Seidel Canby, Walter Harding, and F.B. Sanborn all include a version of this story, though Canby and Harding largely repeat Sanborn’s version (Canby 71-73, Harding 105, Sanborn 60). Even if the story is untrue, the poem can at least be traced to Thoreau’s early career through the *Dial* and his journal. “Sic Vita” was published in the July 1841 *Dial*, and an earlier journal entry dated 16 January 1841 contains a reference to the poem: “‘Sic Vita’ – in The Dial” (221). Thoreau’s editors believe such references saved the writer time when he copied over original manuscript journals; if there was an original “Sic Vita,” this may be a reference to it (616-20). Only one other copy of

the poem is extant: an undated manuscript in the Emerson Family collection at the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Elizabeth Hall Witherell believes this may be the fair copy that Thoreau submitted to the *Dial* for publication (personal correspondence).

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