



## "Here Lies... Rear-Admiral Van": Thoreau's Crowded Grave

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“Here Lies . . . Rear-Admiral Van”:  
Thoreau’s Crowded Grave

GORDON V. BOUDREAU

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The tomb is the only boarding house in which a  
hundred are served at once. . . .

—Thoreau, *Journal*, 3 March 1841

SURELY Lawrence Buell is not alone in finding Thoreau’s most transcendental work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, “a very hard book to hold in one’s mind.” Held to the light, it reveals in part as well as whole a palimpsest of polar opposites, contradictions—or are they resonances “complex beyond telling, . . . [that] seem to vanish in a cloud when one stands at a remove”?<sup>1</sup> Based on a river journey taken by the Thoreau brothers in the late summer of 1839, *A Week* is an extended epitaph for Henry’s brother, John, unnamed in its pages, who died of lockjaw in 1842. From one point of view—Perry Miller’s in *Consciousness in Concord*—the book might be seen as a stratagem of duplicity against the fact of death, a self-deceiving lie; from another—Walter Hesford furnishes a particularly fine example—a remarkable assertion of faith and the future tense.<sup>2</sup> Though he seems to have been

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 206–7, 238. Jonathan Bishop, “The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau’s *Week*,” *ELH* 33 (March 1966): 66–91, discusses the polarities of *A Week*.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Miller, “The Stratagems of Consciousness—Death,” in *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau’s Hitherto “Lost Journal” (1840–1841) Together with Notes and a Commentary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), pp. 55–79; Walter Hesford, “‘Incessant Tragedies’: A Reading of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,” *ELH* 44 (Fall 1977): 515–25.

aware of the contradictions in *A Week*, Thoreau made no concerted effort to suppress them or force their resolutions; he claimed instead that "a work of genius is rough-hewn from the first, because it anticipates the lapse of time, and has an ingrained polish, which still appears when fragments are broken off, an essential quality of its substance."<sup>8</sup>

One such fragment of *A Week* that suggests the lying faith of Thoreau is a verse epitaph for Rear-Admiral Van: "Here lies an honest man . . ." (*A Week*, p. 170). Deceptively light at first reading, it may be as complex, contradictory, and endlessly teasing as the lines of Shakespeare's churchyard clown in *Hamlet*. Like Hamlet, who—on his pilgrimage to "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.79–80)—lingered over two yards of Danish ground in repartee with a quick-witted gravedigger, Thoreau in his pilgrimage puns in relentless amusement over a final lie at his feet.

In "Monday," where the verse occurs, Thoreau has been relating the unfortunate fate of nine men of Dunstable, Massachusetts, killed in an Indian ambush a century earlier, whose graves he evidently saw at firsthand. With a heaviness of spirit in proportion to the weight of the stone under which each of the dead lies, Thoreau complains that such Christian monuments oppress when they should rather "indicate whither the spirit is gone." "Heathenish," he calls them, for to the inevitable "Here lies," they are "upright and emphatic, like exclamation points!" "Why do they not sometimes write, There rises? . . . The rarest quality in an epitaph is truth. If any character is given it should be as severely true as the decision of the three judges below, and not the partial testimony of friends" (*A Week*, pp. 169–70). Since *A Week* may itself be taken as Thoreau's extended epitaph for his best friend and beloved brother, one wonders if *it* can stand up to so "severely true" a judgment. Or, since "Here lies an honest man . . ." follows the remarks about truth as if in illustration, will the fragment

<sup>8</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 376–77. Further references to *A Week* will appear in the text.

stand up? Aside from being made up, is it an "honest" epitaph? Or is it, as Thoreau says of epitaphs generally, "as late, as false, as true" (*A Week*, p. 170)?

Let us draw near to read the inscription on this fragment of *A Week*.

Here lies an honest man,  
Rear-Admiral Van.

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Faith, then ye have  
Two in one grave,  
For in his favor,  
Here too lies the Engraver.

The horizontal line might be taken as a visual rendering of the position of Van's corpse and, by extension, of all that fall. It also divides memorial couplet from a reflection on that couplet, a reflection conveying the Engraver's dissatisfaction at being poet merely; he must try his hand as critic, even at the cost of his own artistry. The first line of the couplet seems fairly forthright, but the second proposes a paradox in the interred—having been born into the *Van* family, he had risen to the rank of *Rear-Admiral*, an observation that gives a hint that "lies" and "honest" in line one might be oxymorons: if Van were honest, an upright man, he surely would not lie; for how can one lie and be upright, and at the rear as well as the front, at once? Or if *one* cannot, are there not perhaps *two* in one grave? Or one man of duplicity? ("We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" [*Hamlet*, 5.1.139-40].)

But the Engraver, reads the verse, lies here too. We may suppose this to be the stonemason of the epitaph who, though he works within the pale of a grave Christian tradition, is faithless to that tradition; he commemorates a dead body rather than a freed spirit: the fruit of the tree of knowledge—death—rather than of the tree of life—resurrection and life everlasting. Thus his faithlessness to the tradition gives him the lie; as the poet asserts, "Here too lies the Engraver."

But the faithlessness of the Engraver aside, is there not, perhaps, another Engraver lying here? The Engraver of lines 3-6 seems to call the Engraver of lines 1 and 2 to task for lying in

the dead Admiral's "favor"—for whitewashing a dishonest man's name and by so doing making himself, as well as the Rear-Admiral, a whited sepulchre. And if such an Engraver "lies" in one grave with Rear-Admiral Van, are there but two in the grave? Or does one man of duplicity (Rear-Admiral Van) plus another such (the Engraver) make four? Or in this case, are there three, since the Engraver, with but one foot in the grave Van is lying in with two, stands on his other, upright and honest outside the grave?

Or do still more lie here? What of that other Engraver, not the epitaph carver but a more deliberate carver of epitaphs—Death—whose incontrovertible word bestows the lie to all at last? When such an Engraver writes, is it to "favor" the dead or the living? If the former, he does so only by a flattering "lie"; if the latter, only by writing sardonically, with the eraser end only. And does not this Engraver thereby make men not only literally grave but grave in expectation as well: depressed by mortal imaginings to live forever in the valley of the shadow of death? Thus, do the expressions of these Engravers (poet, stonemason, Death) make but one grave—or all grave from pondering the infinite dominion of Death? Despite Thoreau's expressed disdain for "Catacombs, . . . Mount Auburn, and even this Dunstable grave-yard" (*A Week*, p. 170), his own reflections on tombstones have led to grave thoughts, as have the reflections of legions of mere mortals.

Still, "Faith" in line 3 may be taken as more than a casual expletive, perhaps as a personification, like the wife, Faith, of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Goodman Brown. Though if "Faith" lies in the grave with Van, with his epitaph writer, with their lying duplicates, with the great Engraver, Death, and with the legion of those whom death has undone by expectation if not experience, she is hardly "honest," and the multitude of those who lie in this common grave seems swollen by one more—by Faith. Or is it that where Faith lies, Death shall have no dominion? If so, does the presence of Faith in the grave make a liar of the great Engraver? Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, walking as if in a daze through the streets of Salem village after

his midnight witching tryst, is faithlessly somber; the maker of these lines, reflecting on the grave with an offhanded "Faith"—first word beneath the ominous horizontal line—is more than a little witty, is tottering at the edge of hilarity as well as the grave. Or is Thoreau, as he remarks in the paragraph immediately following the epitaph, "not competent to write the poetry of the grave" (*A Week*, p. 171)?

Is Thoreau then playing, if not ineptly, not altogether gravely, upon "Faith"? Elsewhere in *A Week* he complains of the lack of playfulness in the Faith of Christianity, which "only hopes. It has hung its harp on the willows, and cannot sing a song" (*A Week*, p. 77). Has he here retrieved the harp from the hanging tree to play away its sad song by means other than music? Does he play on "Faith" to turn the reader's thoughts from death, even as young Hamlet diverted his thoughts from death, that theme altogether too "common," by such "tropical" entertainment as that of the players from the city? In a confessional mood Thoreau once admitted that among his faults were "paradoxes,—saying just the opposite,—. . . Playing with words,—getting the laugh. . . Not always earnest."<sup>4</sup> Is he here simply playing with his subject—Van, Death, Faith? Getting the laugh?

Or is he not just a player with "Faith" but a punning father of lies who subverts our faith in words? Does he prostitute "Faith," perhaps to call attention to his own genius rather than his ostensible subject—a persistent impulse in those who work in the elegiac tradition. Whatever his duplicity in attitude toward Van and readers of his epitaphs ("Here lies . . ." and *A Week*), has Thoreau's overriding motive been not so much to commemorate the dead (Van, John Thoreau) as to win for himself fame, "that last infirmity of mortal mind," as John Milton put it in "Lycidas," a poem so often at the tip of Thoreau's pen? If so, the laugh was certainly on him, since four

<sup>4</sup> *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906), 7:7-8. Citations to this edition (*J*) will hereafter appear in the text. Journal entries before 1844 will be from Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 1: 1837-1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), hereafter referred to in the text as *PJ*.

years after its publication in a print run of 1,000, Thoreau received 706 unsold copies of *A Week* from his publisher, "falsely so-called" and, carrying them up to his third-floor room, found them "something more substantial than fame" (*J*, 5:459). Nor have critics rushed to explicate, even to glance at, "Here lies . . ."; moreover, hard upon the epitaph, Thoreau offered his own disclaimer: "Fame itself is but an epitaph; as late, as false, as true" (*A Week*, p. 170). In a sense, of course, every epitaph is "late"; this one, certainly, is as false as true. In going on to write that "they only are the true epitaphs which Old Mortality retouches," is Thoreau delivering his book—chapter and verse—to another Engraver, Old Mortality, the "onlie real begetter" of epitaphs? Is Henry David Thoreau not so much writer of an epitaph as provider of an occasion for "Old Mortality" to write his crooked lines straight, perhaps to redeem, make tropical, an inscription posed as a faithful lie and change it to a hopeful word of life? In contrast, a somber, faithless Goodman Brown moved through the streets of Salem, as if passing beneath the portals over which is writ "Abandon all hope ye who enter," and came to a troubled lie beneath a stone upon which no hopeful verse was written. Is Thoreau's faith in "Old Mortality" kin to Hamlet's late faith in a "divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10–11)?



"But"—I seem to hear my reader protest—"so to seize on 'Faith' is surely to read something into the epitaph." Perhaps. But only consider what the newly published first volume of Thoreau's *Journal* reveals. Thoreau's entry for 22 October 1843 shows him at work on a series of five epitaphs (*PJ*, 1:478–79), the fourth of which, with slight changes, appears six years later in *A Week*.

[ 1 ]

EPITAPH ON AN ENGRAVER.

By Death's favor  
Here lies th'engraver,  
And now I think o't,

Where lies he not?  
 If the archangel look but where he lies,  
 He ne'er will get translated to the skies.

[ 2 ]

EPITAPH ON PURSY.

Traveller, this is no prison,  
 He is not dead, but risen.  
 Then is there need,  
 To fill his grave,  
 And truth to save,  
 That we should read,—  
 In Pursy's favor  
 Here lies the engraver.

[ 3 ]

EP—ON A GOOD MAN

There rises one

[ 4 ]

Here lies an honest man,  
 Rear Admiral Van.  
 Faith then ye have  
 Two in one grave,  
 For, by your favor,  
 Here lies the engraver.

[ 5 ]

EP ON THE WORLD.

Here lies the body of this world,  
 Whose soul alas to Hell is hurled.  
 Its golden youth long since was past,  
 Its silver manhood went as fast,  
 And iron age drew on at last;  
 'Tis vain its character to tell,  
 The several fates which it befell,  
 What year it died, when 't will arise,  
 We only know know [*sic*] that here it lies.



One might assume that the five epitaphs represent a genetic process leading to a single, preferred version of the poem. In Epitaph 1, a persona concentrates on an Engraver who lies "By Death's favor." But in looking about the graveyard, the persona wonders "Where lies he not?" Then he muses that if an archangel looked upon where the Engraver "lies" (ambiguous word) "he [likewise ambiguous—archangel? Engraver?] ne'er will get translated to the skies."

In Epitaph 2, the opening couplet seems to represent a gravestone epitaph, the second line alluding to the angel's response to the inquiries of Mary and Mary Magdalen upon their arrival at the tomb to recover the body of Christ: "He is not here: for he is risen" (Matt. 28:6; see also Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6). In the remaining sestet, the persona somewhat cynically appraises his premature celebration of unrealized hopes of resurrection. The two-part rhetorical structure latent in Epitaph 1 is here more pronounced to delineate more clearly the tonal shift from public faith to private doubt. But unlike Epitaph 1, the emphasis here is less on the Engraver than on the buried Pursy, a name Thoreau's wit does not capitalize upon. But again consider: "Pursy," compare "purse," "purser," "bursar," a name to suggest a man "employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal"—as Thoreau put it in "Economy."<sup>5</sup> That the Engraver lies "in Pursy's favor" might suggest doubt in the likelihood of resurrection for those who practice the economy "Pursy" suggests, a name to number, perhaps, among those who lead lives of quiet desperation.

In Epitaph 3—which consists of a title and but a single line, perhaps incomplete—Thoreau may well have been pondering the Christian promise of resurrection with tentative faith in a "truth to save" (Epitaph 2). Moreover, the original title of Epitaph 3, as the editors of the *Journal* reveal, was "Ep—on a god man" (*PJ*, 1:656n, emphasis added). It may be that Epitaph 3 suggested to Thoreau what is invoked by a more general "Faith" in the Epitaph in *A Week*: a suspension of dis-

<sup>5</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 5; hereafter citations will appear in the text.

belief in the unique "god man" who "is risen" (Epitaph 2) from the final "lie," though the possibility that faith in a risen Christ might be faith in a "lie" is not rejected.

Epitaph 5, according to Carl Bode, is "distinctly unusual in the completeness of [its] central metaphor," so much so, it seems to me, as to be alien to Thoreau's genius.<sup>6</sup> Personification, polish, balance—these have put a Jonsonian classical distance between speaker and subject, a world whose body "lies," indeed, but whose soul "alas to Hell is hurled." In nine lines Thoreau traces the familiar pattern of decline of this world from "golden youth" through "silver manhood" and "iron age" to final lying state. Except in the last lines, the punning seems sublimated for the sake of form; the sharp tonal shift evident in Epitaphs 1, 2, and 4 is nearly absent. Epitaph 5 is therefore a cleaner, but not a deeper, poem: as Arthur L. Ford has pointed out in commenting on "Epitaph on an Engraver," the first of the five poems in the *Journal* entry, for Thoreau it is "the pun [which] usually increases the subtlety and complexity of the point being made."<sup>7</sup>

Immediately following Epitaph 5 in the *Journal*, Thoreau mentions John Donne, a poet whose witty style his own resembles. Both authors practice abrupt tonal shifts that deepen meaning; both take pleasure in punning, even on their own names. In bringing up Donne at this point, Thoreau's self-conscious instinct is sounder than his judgment that "Donne was not a poet—but a man of strong sense—a sturdy English thinker—Full of conceits and whimsicalities hammering away at his subject be it eulogy or Epitaph—sonnet or Satire—with the patience of a day laboror [*sic*]—without the least taste, but with an occasional fine distinction and poetic utterance of a high order" (*PJ*, 1:479). One suspects Thoreau's "high order" is a punning epithet on the English "Divine," who "was rather Doctor Donne than the poet Donne. He gropes for the most part," even as Thoreau had just been doing

<sup>6</sup> *Collected Poems of Henry Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode, enl. ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 364.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur L. Ford, "The Poetry of Henry David Thoreau," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 61, pt. 1 (4th qtr. 1970): 16.

over the grave of his Rear Admiral in the journal entry of 22 October.

If each epitaph represents a stage in a genetic process, one would surmise that the position given to "Here Lies the Body of the World" in the Princeton edition suggests that it is the final refinement of an impetus that earlier produced "Here lies an honest man." If that were the case, I would argue that in version 5, Thoreau mars his poem. But since the whole of "Here lies . . ." was written vertically in the margin of the manuscript page of the *Journal*, though not there marked for inserting, it may well represent the latest version, perhaps an interpolation introduced sometime after 22 October (see *PJ*, 1:656n). That it is the only version printed in Thoreau's lifetime would seem to give it the strongest claim for representing the author's intention—if not at the time of the journal entry in 1843, at least at the time of the publication of *A Week* six years later. Minimal changes from the journal version are significant: in *A Week* "Faith," set off by a comma, is more emphatic than in the journal version; and "too" is added to accentuate the pun value of "lies" in the last line—"Here too lies the Engraver." Hence the slight changes emphasize duplicity—a lying faith.



To Perry Miller the pages in "Monday" that form the immediate context for "Here lies" only "make fun of New England epitaphs (in a way that recalls Benjamin Franklin's satire), disclaim any competence for composing in the genre, and drop the subject by recommending that the farmer who has skimmed his farm ought to be plowed into it." Miller finds all this a gambit on Thoreau's part to dispose of death "by turning it into a joke" having something to do with fertilizer; nonetheless, it is a "shallow" one, "since for most of us death is not a joke."<sup>8</sup> But surely Miller reads his attitude into Thoreau's pages, though in a sense to read Thoreau is to exercise any reader's faith.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Consciousness in Concord*, p. 68.

In the work sheets of these pages of *A Week*, Miller found an indication of an intense but (to him) unavailing struggle on Thoreau's part to master the subject of death and resurrection. Miller notes that one work sheet begins a sentence with "We believe in a speedy resurrection of the body . . .," which is followed by a paragraph beginning "I believe in a speedy resurrection of the body in some other form, — in corn for fodder — in wood for fuel; in grain and flowers for use or beauty." Miller then links these work sheets with the pages that deal with the resurrection of the "strong and beautiful bug" at the end of *Walden*, a book he regards as "a song of death and a paean of resurrection." He then presents as relevant the text of a letter to Isaiah Williams on 14 March 1842, a few short months after the death of John Thoreau, in which Thoreau ponders the subject of mortality: "Let us not consent to be old," he writes, "but to die (live?) rather. Is Truth old? or Virtue — or Faith? If we possess them they will be our *elixir vitae* and fount of youth."<sup>9</sup> Though Miller's instinct about the relevance of this letter rings true, in assessing Thoreau's attempt to work through the theme as a conscious stratagem to forestall and elude death, Miller discounts Thoreau's conclusion that if we possess Truth, Virtue, Faith, they will "be our *elixir vitae* and fount of youth." The difference may come down to whether faith can be more than a stratagem of consciousness. Miller, it appears, thought not; Thoreau, I submit, believed otherwise — that he was not practicing self-deception but recognizing a fact of the spirit. It may all come down to whether one accepts Thoreau as a poet-seer or, as Miller does, a poet-maker, a manipulator, even of himself, *especially* of himself.

In 1839 Thoreau had embarked with his brother John from Concord, Massachusetts, on a voyage of discovery; half-way through his rival journey to Concord, New Hampshire, he came upon the Dunstable graveyard where nine men had been interred more than a century before. Following the death

<sup>9</sup> Miller, *Consciousness in Concord*, pp. 225 n. 10, 69–70, 76, 71, 72; see esp. Miller's discussion on pp. 68–76 and 225 n. 10.

of his brother John in 1842, he attempted to make of his journey to the springs of the Merrimack on the slopes of Mt. Agio-cohook a fable of the rediscovery of youth. But at the anticipated climax of his travelogue from Concord to Concord, Thoreau discovered the fall of man, as he suggests in quoting, not altogether faithfully, a stanza on death from George Herbert's "Virtue" (*A Week*, p. 314):

Sweet days, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky,  
Sweet dew shall weep thy fall to-night,  
For thou must die.

In his journal entry of 22 October 1843, Thoreau would ponder the inescapable fate of man by writing a series of epitaphs that suggest a serious, as well as playful, entertainment of faith in the efficacy of Christian resurrection. Not only does "Here lies . . ." betray that bent, so too does the epigraph for "Saturday," two lines from Francis Quarles's "Christ's Invitation to the Soul."<sup>10</sup> And two chapters later, where his epitaph on Rear-Admiral Van occurs, Thoreau proposes Christ as "the prince of Reformers and Radicals" (*A Week*, p. 137), and what more radical reformer ever proposed to give death the lie, to effect the grand, transcendental metamorphosis? To be sure, Thoreau would not win faith in this resurrection fellow in *A Week*, though he would retain his hope. In the penultimate paragraph of his first book, he writes, "we will go on, like those Chinese cliff swallows, feathering our nests with the froth, which may one day be bread of life to such as dwell by the sea-shore" (*A Week*, p. 393).

<sup>10</sup> *A Week*, p. 15. During the period immediately before writing his journal epitaphs, Thoreau may have found spiritual nourishment in Francis Quarles's "Divine Poems as well as Emblems," which he found "quite a discovery," as he wrote to Emerson from Staten Island on 14 September 1843. (See *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode [New York: New York University Press, 1958], p. 139.) One month later, a mere six days before the journal epitaphs, he wrote to Mrs. Emerson of reading as much of Quarles as he could get and mentioned Quarles's long poems about biblical subjects, "interspersed with meditations. . . . He uses language sometimes as greatly as Shakespeare, and though there is not straight grain in him, there is plenty of tough crooked timber" (16 October 1843, *Correspondence*, p. 144).

In *Walden* Thoreau would embark on another pilgrimage from Concord to Concord, but this time his destination would be an interior one ("I have travelled a good deal in Concord"); and in the chapter "Spring" he would encounter at close quarters a great Engraver, who was busily converting death to life in the thawing bankside at the Deep Cut of the railroad that pared through a low hill at the western edge of Walden Pond. The intersection of these two journeys to Concord—the horizontal one of *A Week* and the vertical one of *Walden*—forms a great crossroads where Death meets and is challenged by an underlying Faith. In midwinter, 1851, Thoreau seems to have located himself squarely at such a crossroads, when he appended a second couplet to the brief Calvinistic creed long since broadcast by the *New England Primer* (*J*, 2:153):

In Adam's fall  
We sinned all.  
In the new Adam's rise  
We shall all reach the skies.

In *A Week* Thoreau had fabled of the fall of man; in *Walden*, he would fable of his resurrection. By late 1850, he seems to have pondered well the New England ground of his Faith: "I love nature . . . the landscape, because it is so sincere. It never cheats me. It never jests." Then he added a pun of infuriatingly paradoxical honesty, "I lie and relie [*sic*] on the earth" (*J*, 2:100).

Sixteen years to the day after writing his journal epitaphs, Thoreau would complain that it seemed as if "the modern Christian" began all his prayers with "'Now I lay me down to sleep.' . . . He shows the whites of his eyes on the Sabbath and the blacks all the rest of the week" (*J*, 12:419). By then, however, Thoreau's own faith had become diurnal, or, rather, he had made a true sabbatical of all his works and days, and while black-eyed, somnabulant "Christians" seemed intent on looking for a place to lie down and sleep, he expressed his faith as a new Adam, striving not merely to show the whites of his eyes but to become ever more wonderfully awake to a sun that,

though yet "but a morning star," might one day become "the light which puts out our eyes" (*Walden*, p. 333).

In his spiritual journey from *A Week* to *Walden*, Thoreau had so far succeeded that his hope of resurrection had matured to confidence and possession. On 8 September 1851, but a few days after first hearing the wonderful harmonies of the newly strung "telegraph harp" in the Deep Cut, he wrote of his desire, after an Indian summer to his life, to "once more *lie on the ground with faith*, as in spring, and even with more serene confidence. . . . As one year passes into another through the medium of winter, so does this our life pass into another through the medium of death" (*J*, 2:481-82; emphasis added). Similarly, in *Walden*, Thoreau would edit a Christian catechism by driving life into a corner to discover and publish how rich or mean it was and then pick up his hammer and attempt to nail its meaning, himself included, into a pine box, so to speak, only to have that meaning slip through his fingers by being translated into a living word, a scripture. Indeed, it may have been that the Old Adam and the New were cunning duplicates and that Thoreau's discovery of the New Adam within was the discernment of an interior self, a double, a co-redeemer, a spiritual fellow-traveler the likes of whom had been indicated by Christ's corrective to those misguided journeymen who looked to Jerusalem: "The Kingdom of God is within" (Luke 17:21). Rejecting the superficial planetary travel of the great explorers of his time, Thoreau freely translates Claudian: "Let them wander and scrutinize the outlandish Australians. / I have more of God, they more of the road" (*Walden*, p. 322).

In *Walden* Thoreau wrote that "to strike at the root of the matter at once,—for the root is faith,—I am accustomed to answer [unbelievers], that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say" (*Walden*, p. 65). Clinching his nails in *Walden*, however many he may have bent in the erection of the cabin itself, Thoreau reproved man's would-be Engraver by paraphrasing the great disciple of Christian resurrection: "O

Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory?" (Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:55). Thoreau prudently adds "then" (*Walden*, p. 317), because in the Old Nick he tried to catch and notch upon his stick in *Walden*, there just might be a little life stirring—and transcendental wit as well. It had been so, near Elsinore, where a young Prince in pilgrim garb quibbled relentlessly with one of Adam's profession over who "dost lie" in the grave, the quick or the dead. It was so at the grave of Rear-Admiral Van, where—in language teasing, paradoxical, tropical, and no less serious than laughable—Thoreau had left no stone unturned in drawing to an end with his Rear-Admiral. But in his literary attempt to "hold up Adam's profession," he could neither slam the lid on the Old Adam within, nor on the legion of recalcitrant sons of Adam who might also lie there, for Faith, daughter of a New Adam, might also lie with Rear-Admiral Van in what had become, in Thoreau's imagination, a deucedly crowded grave.

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### [Footnotes]

<sup>1</sup> **The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week**

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*ELH*, Vol. 33, No. 1. (Mar., 1966), pp. 66-91.

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<sup>2</sup> **"Incessant Tragedies": A Reading of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers**

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*ELH*, Vol. 44, No. 3. (Autumn, 1977), pp. 515-525.

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