Dreaming the Remotest Future: 
Hermeneutic Friends in Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

The Private and Public(ation)

In 1849, Henry David Thoreau published his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, at his own expense and had to guarantee the costs if the book did not sell. As it turned out, the book fared badly, selling approximately 200 copies in four years. In his journal, on October 28, 1853, Thoreau wrote:

> For a year or 2 past—my publisher, falsely so called, has been writing from time to time to ask what disposition should be made of the copies of ‘A Week on the Concord & Merrimack Rivers’ still on hand, and at last suggesting that he had use for the room they occupied in his cellar. . . . My works are piled up on one side of my chamber half as high as my head—my *opera omnia*. This is authorship—these are the work of my brain. . . .

> Nevertheless, in spite of this result—sitting beside the inert mass of my works—I take up my pen tonight to record what thought or experience I may have had with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed. I believe that this result is more inspiring & better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less & leaves me freer. (*J*,7: 122–23; italics original)

Although the first book was a commercial failure, Thoreau did not lose faith in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.
In later years, he sold or distributed the rest of the copies to his friends, while he kept revising the text until just before his death in 1862 (Thoreau, *A Week* 434). While he must have been devastated by the fact that his book was not welcomed by contemporary readers and ironically refers to his publisher as “falsely so called,” at the same time, Thoreau drew a strange kind of “satisfaction” from the disappointing sales. This is partly because he found his “privacy” was less affected by the commoditization of his writings into his “wares,” and partly because he felt free from the demands of consumer society. But it is significant that in this journal entry Thoreau indicates his ambivalent desire for both privacy and publicity, ultimately presenting privacy as a form of inviolable sanctuary from the “thousand” readers.

To some extent, Thoreau worried about externalizing his private self in a published text, particularly one meant for mass consumption. This raises an important question: To whom was Thoreau addressing his book? And why did he need to secure his privacy? Milette Shamir takes up the tension in antebellum writings “between the desire to express the self and the desire to find reprieve from self-expression” (8) and argues that Thoreau’s aesthetic of self-disclosure nonetheless maintains a veil of privacy (223). Following Shamir’s argument, in this paper, I focus on Thoreau’s tactics of disclosure and concealment in light of same-sex intimacy. Over the last few decades, scholars have increasingly examined the problematic of Thoreau’s love and sexuality. For instance, Walter Harding acknowledges Thoreau’s ambiguous sexuality, saying that his “intense love of nature may have resulted from sublimation of . . . homoeroticism” (23). Examining *Walden* (1854), Michael Warner contends that Thoreau’s writing circles around “conspicuously unsatisfied desires” (‘Walden’s” 157), while he “frequently gave vent in the journal to a sense of frustration” at the inarticulate nature of his desire (“Thoreau’s” 63). In scrutinizing Thoreau’s *Journals*, Perry Miller, Sharon Cameron, and more recently, Peter Coviello stress the difference between a published persona (i.e. the *Walden* persona) and a private self (i.e. the Thoreau of *Journals*). However, these two ostensibly different personas are perhaps not so distinct in his first book, where the voices are entangled with one another. Although critics have investigated Thoreau’s unfulfilled desire in *Walden* and *Journals*, few have considered the way Thoreau’s complex longings for other men complicated his relationship to his readership in *A Week*.

Focusing on his vision of friendship, I intend to explore how Thoreau develops
an alternative trajectory of intimacy: One that allows longing for friends, while avoiding the dangers of self-exposure. I first look at Thoreau’s concerns with same-sex intimacy by reading Anacreon’s odes that Thoreau translated. I then investigate the ways in which Thoreau’s friendship presupposes a kind of inviolable privacy, which gradually became associated with morality; for Thoreau, private individuality and its opaque interiority open up, at once, for the proliferation of and vulnerability to others’ interpretations. Indeed, his essay on friendship, as John Carlos Rowe points out, serves to organize Thoreau’s concerns with literary and interpersonal communication (93). Finally, I turn to Thoreau’s theory of friendship as intimately connected to the relationship between the author and reader. Although it is entirely out of an individual author’s control, Thoreau’s theory of friendship promises the eventual arrival of ideal readers and, therefore, the possibility of intimate friends in the remotest future.

Another Kind of Love

Thoreau almost always regards love or sensuality with suspicion. For considering the problematic of intimacy for Thoreau, it is worth taking a look at the end of the “Tuesday” chapter in A Week, where he inserts his translations of the odes of Anacreon, the Greek poet. While Lawrence Buell has noted that these “love poems” lay the groundwork for the digression on friendship in the “Wednesday” chapter (Literary 224–25), little attention has been paid to the consistent theme of the poems that Thoreau selected. Richard Bridgman, one of the few critics who treat the significance of the poetry in Thoreau’s text, claims that it is “notable that Thoreau did not select those odes in which Anacreon was happy, fulfilled, or feeling gaiety and pleasure. Rather, the feelings expressed concern the enslavement and toils of love” (54). Indeed, all of the odes quoted are concerned with unfulfilled, painful love, or the very impossibility of love.

Thoreau translated Anacreon’s poetry by himself for the Dial in 1843 and inserted the eleven poems into A Week. He admires the ancient poet because he is now “bodiless,” so that Thoreau can “converse” with him “without reserve or personality” (Thoreau, A Week 225–26). These poems must have somehow fascinated Thoreau, as he comments that they are “some of the best” and “strangely modern” to him (227, 226). Where the generally accepted image of Anacreon for Thoreau’s contemporaries was “the erotic, bisexual hedonist” (Bridgman 53), he insists upon Anacreon’s “ethereal and evanescent” qualities (226). Thoreau comments that:
“they are not gross, as has been presumed, but always elevated above the sensual” (227). Yet, despite his denial of sensuality, or possibly because of his gesture of purifying the sensual, there is a kind of affinity between these poems and Thoreau’s consideration of love that we should examine before pondering the idea of friendship put forth in the “Wednesday” chapter.

Anacreon’s ode, “On His Lyre,” begins with the lament that, although the poet tries to sing of heroes, “my lyre / Sings only loves” (227). Thus, this first poem lays the ground for the theme of a set of odes—the problematic of love. Bathyllus, a celebrated pantomime of Alexandria, with whom Anacreon was in love, appears in three of the eleven poems Thoreau selected. At points in “To A Swallow,” the poet threatens to clip the “loquacious swallow[’s feathers]” or “pluck out / [his] tongue from within” because the swallow “plundered Bathyllus / From [his] beautiful dreams” (230). The poet laments the lover’s leaving as well as his eternal expulsion from his intimate space of attachment—“beautiful dreams.” This is noteworthy because the poet condemns the swallow for its loquaciousness, threatening to cut out its tongue, a motif that resonates with the significance of silence in Thoreau’s idea of friendship, which I will return to later.

In another of Anacreon’s verses, “On Lovers,” the poet sees lovers, knowing “them at once, / For they have a certain slight / Brand on their hearts” (230). The term “brand” has negative connotations here, showing the disgrace of the lovers’ intimacy. The negative aspects of love are more explicit in two other poems that revolve around Cupid (i.e. Eros/Love). In “Cupid Wounded,” Cupid complains of having been stung by a bee (described as “A little serpent”), whereupon his mother, Venus, remarks: “If the sting / Of a bee afflicts you, / How, think you, are they afflicted, / Love, whom you smite?” (227, 231). Thoreau uses the term “smite” to suggest that love always comes with pain and suffering. Moreover, stung by a bee and crying with pain, Cupid tells his mother, “I am killed, and I die” (231). The association of love and death serves to indicate not only the profound ache of the affection but also an expression of the god of love’s unrequited feelings. In other words, what is striking is the way Thoreau identifies the moment of suffering as the most delicious one. Strangely, though, the image of love as a kind of smiting further attests to the impossibility of love: in “On Love,” when “A water-snake stung [the poet],” “Love [Cupid was] fanning [his] brows / With his soft wings, said, / Surely, thou art not able to love” (231; italics mine). Here, the poet emphasizes the impossibility of loving others despite such fierce
Taken together, the translations are notable because they demonstrate Thoreau’s ambivalence toward the theme of love as expressed by the bodiless and yet sensual Greek poet. The poems Thoreau selected foreground the love of Anacreon and Bathyllus and ultimately deny the possibility of male-male intimacy. However, given that Thoreau’s selection of odes indicates affliction as a standard mode of love, he seems to suggest that the willful suffering associated with impossible male-male intimacy should be fostered as the best proof of love. This twisted logic of love is best understood in Thoreau’s well-known poem on “a gentle boy” (originally published as “Sympathy” in the Dial in 1840 and later inserted in A Week). The poem is Thoreau’s imagined elegy for the eleven-year-old Edmund Sewall: “Yet now am forced to know, though hard it is, / I might have loved him had I loved him less. . . . / Sorrow is dearer in such case to me / Than all the joys other occasion yields” (260–61). The poem later turns to an elegy, hinting that the boy is dead: The gentle boy is “irrevocably gone,” ringing his “Knell of departure,” and the poet “[m]ake[s] haste and celebrate[s] [his] tragedy” by singing this “elegy” (213). Shamir reads this as a “lament over the impossibility of male-male intimacy” (218). But, I would add, Thoreau does not necessarily lament the loss. Rather, the boy becomes Thoreau’s intimate friend precisely because he leaves him so utterly alone; the estrangement itself clears the way for future intimacy. As Maki Sadahiro contends, the loss of the friend is “a necessary, indispensable and constitutive element of friendship” (150).

For Thoreau, actual personal friendship and intimacy frequently caused profound dissatisfaction, isolation, and suffering. In his writing, we even see him advocating for preserving hate in personal relationships: “we have not so good a right to hate any as our Friend”; “Let such pure hate still underprop / Our love” (282, 287). This does not sound so perverse if we consider that intimacy for Thoreau seems absolutely hopeless in the present society. Such negative feelings actually allow him to avoid suffering to some extent; the expression of suffering becomes a defense against further suffering. Thus, the essay on friendship in the “Wednesday” chapter might be seen as registering Thoreau’s struggle with another kind of love.

**Privacy, Morality, Silence**

Thoreau’s vision of intimacy invariably entails estrangement and suffering. In
the last part of the “Wednesday” chapter, while spending a night by the river on one of his trips, Thoreau dreams of “an event which had occurred long before. It was a difference with a Friend, which had not ceased to give [him] pain” (296). But his subtle feeling of guilt and affliction is “unspeakably soothed and rejoiced” in the dream (296). He continues, writing about “the real character” in the dream:

Dreams are the touchstones of our characters. We are scarcely less afflicted when we remember some unworthiness in our conduct in a dream, than if it had been actual, and the intensity of our grief, which is our atonement, measures the degree by which this is separated from an actual unworthiness . . . . In dreams we see ourselves naked and acting out our real characters, even more clearly than we see others awake. But an unwavering and commanding virtue would compel even its most fantastic and faintest dreams to respect its ever-wakeful authority; as we are accustomed to say carelessly, we should never have dreamed of such a thing. Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake. (297; italics original)

We never learn what the difference was that Thoreau had with his friend, which, he tells us, continued to give him pain. However, it is no doubt associated with the shame in his actual life (“some unworthiness”). Here again, as we saw with the delicious torments that paradoxically turn into the foundation of love for Thoreau, “the intensity of our grief” precisely becomes “our atonement.” While Thoreau supposes that we may be more true to ourselves in dreams, such dreams—“even [the] most fantastic and faintest dreams”—are forced to succumb to an “ever-wakeful authority.” In this way, the passage reveals the disparity between his naked, real character and public authority; that is, the gap between his private and public self.

In a similar vein, Thoreau wrote about the longing for the true self in one journal entry: “The nearest approach to discovering what we are is in dreams” (J,1: 304–05). Thus, it might be appropriate to say that in the real society Thoreau feels somewhat estranged from himself—“what we are”/“our truest life.” One might also assert that his alienated feelings partially originate from his sense of his “naked” body: “I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body” (J,1: 365). While this entry shows Thoreau wondering at his bodily sensations, he must have also felt the unconscious corporeal forces that occurred outside the self.
As Bruce Burgett articulates, in the era before the late-nineteenth-century sexologists’ categorizations, “there was a greater flexibility in the thinking of the erotic, less focused on object choice, and better able to articulate desires that expand and expose the limits of what now registers as the sexual” (71). In other words, this was a period before “sexuality” had emerged, along with “the body and its sensations[,] as sites of political and social contestation, mobilization, and regulation” (Burgett 71). The mid-nineteenth century was a moment when it was not assumed that every person and every intimacy could be assigned to hetero- or homosexuality, though the first stirrings of that great taxonomical division, “the initial movements of coordination and solidification, could already be felt” for people (Coviello, Tomorrow’s 4; italics original). Arousing suspicion about seemingly “unnatural” desires, Thoreau’s account of an “ever-wakeful authority” indicates a certain kind of anxiety about his conduct even in a dream.

This sense of an ever-present disciplining power might also be considered in light of the relationship between privacy and morality. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as Christopher Castiglia and Stacey Margolis argue, the conception of the moral role of privacy gradually emerged and privacy became a moral characterization. That is, morality was not so much a public practice as the character of the private self. Privacy thus constituted “the moods, behaviors, and embodiments that oriented individuals to the moral and sexual order of modern, secular society” (Murison 699).

Thoreau’s treatment of privacy echoes the era’s growing consensus with regard to the moral character of the private self. In Thoreau’s theory of friendship, privacy is intimately connected with silence and must be deeply hidden so that one cannot read its inside. Countering the demand to understand silence as the inner place of self-truth/morality, Thoreau advocates for silence as a universal refuge:

Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts, a balm to our every chagrin, as welcome after satiety as after disappointment; that background which the painter may not daub, be he master or bungler, and which, however awkward a figure we may have made in the foreground, remains ever our inviolable asylum, where no indignity can assail, no personality disturb us. (392)
Here, the terms “refuge” and “asylum” seem to suggest the ways that Thoreau makes silence a private interior space, in which nothing can be brought forth for public scrutiny. Thus, for Thoreau, privacy should be kept silent and deeply veiled; it becomes the right to an inviolable personality.

Along these lines, Thoreau repeatedly asserts the need to protect the innermost self, even when dealing with friends. In the “Wednesday” chapter, Thoreau imagines being addressed by a “true and not despairing Friend”:

“I never asked thy leave to let me love thee,—I have a right. I love thee not as something private and personal, which is your own, but as something universal and worthy of love, which I have found.” (269; italics original)

He loves what he found “universal” within the Friend, something not private and personal. Friendship is usually cultivated and strengthened through revealing the private self, inner thoughts, and feelings. However, Thoreau’s friendship contains the kind of intimacy that paradoxically privileges impersonal factors: “Between us, if necessary, let there be no acquaintance” (270). The paradoxical nature of the Friend’s statement presents the ethical demand that one not intrude the other’s private space. The non-relationship between Friends is therefore telling of the inviolability of the other, which nonetheless expects the future possibility of “true friendship” across time. At first glance, Thoreau’s emphasis on the universal suggests his advocacy for transcendental communion, but we can also see his powerful obsession with securing a private realm that is never to be violated. This recognition of the limits of comprehensibility of the other echoes exactly what Thoreau hopes for from his friend. Thoreau seems to make this privacy more private, thus preserving the alterity of the other—and of himself as well. This is a key feature of Thoreau’s understanding of the private self, which is intimately connected with the idea of silence.

In contrast with the confessional mode that makes private space a locus of regulation and moral consciousness, Thoreau’s remark is striking: “We often forbear to confess our feelings, not from pride, but for fear that we could not continue to love the one who required us to give such proof of our affection” (278–79). Thoreau twists the link between open-heartedness and truth telling that is generally considered a virtue of friendship. But more importantly, at the core of his fear of emotional coercion is a sense of how strongly friendship was shaped by
ideological affective norms. Thus, Thoreau’s negative feelings, such as dissatisfaction and irritation, hint at the complex forms of entanglement between the subject and the communal context rather than purely personal sensations.

From the preceding argument, we can now understand why Thoreau, who is extremely sensitive to publicity, quite often felt irritation when his silence was misunderstood. It is crucial to recognize how central negative feelings are in Thoreau’s text. Notice the undertone of something unfulfilled or disappointing in what he writes about friendship: “What avails it that another loves you, if he does not understand you? Such love is a curse. What sort of companionship are they who are presuming always that their silence is more expressive than yours?” (278). This passage reveals his intense anger and frustration that possibly results from failures in the reciprocal understanding of silence. Indeed, such negative emotions suffuse Thoreau’s essay on friendship, particularly in his treatment of violations of privacy.

As we have seen, Thoreau repeatedly emphasizes the significance of silence or reticence in intercourse between friends. He insists that silence protect our intimacy in the following passage:

It may be that your silence was the finest thing of the two. There are some things which a man never speaks of, which are much finer kept silent about. To the highest communications we only lend a silent ear. Our finest relations are not simply kept silent about, but buried under a positive depth of silence, never to be revealed. (278)

Traditionally, Thoreau’s silence has been seen as gesturing toward an idealized invocation of perfect communication beyond conventional language. However, Thoreau here lays stress on the importance of silence, not so for loftier communications, but for the “positive depth of silence,” under which something is kept and never to be revealed. The silence is therefore unspeakable, concealed, and unreadable; although it may sound paradoxical, it should be understood as silence. After the passage above, he goes on: “It may be that we are not even yet acquainted. In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood” (278). But who is there who might understand Thoreau’s silence?
Intimate Reading

While Thoreau needs to keep his privacy intact, he nonetheless has a strong desire to share the private self with a particular kind of friend. Thoreau comments, “Silence is the ambrosial night in the intercourse of Friends” (272). Given that “intercourse” means both linguistic and physical communications, the “ambrosial night” subtly implies a dark secret space that is filled with men’s pleasure and guilt, which does not exclude the possibility of (homo)eroticism. Indeed, Thoreau uses the same phrase in his essay “Reform and Reformers”: “Silence is the ambrosial night in the intercourse of men in which their sincerity is recruited and takes deeper root” (Reform Papers 190; italics mine). Here the term “men,” instead of the gender-neutral “Friends,” evinces the male homo-social and -erotic intimacy in his theory of friendship. Thus, silence here is not purely a secluded space with regard to morality but also a fleeting moment of sharing nocturnal pleasures, suggesting another possible way of forging an interdependent relationship.

Therefore, Thoreau’s seemingly impersonal friendship embraces, perhaps counter-intuitively, a sensual constituent. It is interesting to note, however, that this intimacy is almost exclusively associated with the textual encounter in A Week. Remarking at one point that the “language of Friendship is not words but meanings” (273), Thoreau, in a sense, seeks its recognition within the reader. The meanings can be understood as the reader’s interpretation, “an intelligence above language” (273). The written words then come to be imaginatively read in silence, which also gives the silence voices in this intersubjective relationship. Accordingly, the language of friendship is in its essence close to speech, which should be heard in pursuit of the truth. Thoreau at once recognizes and requires the presence of an audience: “It takes two to speak the truth,—one to speak, and another to hear” (267).

Toward the end of the book, Thoreau praises classical works, such as Homer and Chaucer, describing how “true verses come toward us indistinctly, as the very breath of all friendliness” (374). Of interest is not just that Thoreau presupposes the authors behind the texts but also his emphasis on the corporeality of the verses, the very body of the poets in his reading experiences: a friendly breathing. This recalls a chapter in Walden, “Reading,” where he describes intimate reading with the same rhetoric of oral experiences:

A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate
with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man’s thought becomes a modern man’s speech. (Thoreau, *Walden* 102)

Books—written words—are quite distinct from other forms of art and near to life itself, as they are “breathed from all human lips.” Given that readers in the antebellum era tended to equate an author’s personal character with the character of his works (Hochman 14), Thoreau seems to share the convention that an author’s character is implied in his or her book.

In *A Week*, Thoreau also writes, “Give me a sentence which no intelligence can understand. There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it, and under its words a kind of blood must circulate forever. . . . [The] voice of man can be heard so little way, and we are not now within ear-shot of any contemporary” (151). Emphasizing the corporeality of the words, Thoreau hypothesizes that written words let individuals draw close to others in thought and feeling while avoiding the emotional homogenization of contemporaneousness. Accordingly, a reader’s distance in time and space from classical authors is not a pitfall but an asset.

In relation to this, Thoreau conjures up the life of the author embodied in his works:

> The true poem is not that which the public read. 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. His true work will not stand in any prince’s gallery.
> 
> My life has been the poem I would have writ,
> But I could not both live and utter it. (343)

The true poem is the author’s life, what the poet himself has become through his poetry, which the public cannot read. Again, as in his journal entry where Thoreau felt satisfaction with the returned copies of his book (“the inert mass”), he rejects
mass consumption of his true poem here. At the same time, Thoreau invites readers into an intimate relationship with him through his book and hopes we will become such intimate readers, who will hear the melody of his poetry. Therefore, Thoreau’s claims of privacy do not simply point to an autonomous, private self but gesture toward an intersubjective relationship to be engaged in with readers.

**Hermeneutic Friends**

As Daniel Peck claims, *A Week* is Thoreau’s “most insistently and explicitly temporal work” (9); it is obvious that the trip down the river is inseparable from the currents of time. Moreover, if friendship has a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, the voyage itself serves as the trope for friendship. Throughout the journey, Thoreau concentrates on the past as well as the future. Meredith McGill contends that *A Week* incorporates ancient verse to “inscribe a disjunctive relation to the past, not to overcome temporal and spatial dislocation” (367). As I have demonstrated, the distant relations of Thoreau’s friendship theory are reproduced in the distance between his text and his readers. Indeed, a literary text becomes a kind of human relation, and reading itself offers a strong connection between the author and the reader. Thoreau treasures poetry because it can create intimacies that are at once private and public; poetry opens up the future possibility of indirect, not necessarily reciprocal, communication with others.

In his book *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall*, Christopher Nealon describes the ways in which twentieth-century gay and lesbian authors attempt to find a place in history by imagining alternative forms of queer community. For Nealon, queer texts are particularly unfinished projects; in their inarticulate hopes and desires, these texts gesture toward intimate alliances across time. “Foundling texts” anticipate future readers, and, in so doing, they are possibly realized with the emergence of a particular kind of reader. Nealon writes:

> Because [foundling texts] do not properly belong either to the inert, terminal narratives of inversion or to the triumphant, progressive narrative of archiving ethnic coherence, they suggest another time, a time of expectation, in which their key stylistic gestures, choice of genre, and ideological frames all point to an inaccessible future, in which the inarticulate desires that mobilize them will find some “hermeneutic friend” beyond the historical horizon of their unintelligibility to themselves. (23)
In this vein, Thoreau’s *A Week* inhabits a “time of expectation,” as he awaits ideal friends who will fully understand his text. True, Thoreau presents intimate reading with metaphors of corporeal correspondence and dreams to encounter an ideal friend. But his dreaming of encounters with future friends is penetrated by negative emotions like irritation, anxiety, and despair. To put it another way, his attachment to the future demonstrates that Thoreau imagines an ideal encounter with a friend somewhere other than his historical present. Thoreau’s address to the future friend is therefore not necessarily optimistic.

Investigating the author’s journals, Coviello argues that Thoreau was not just a man disappointed in others but was possessed with “what we might also think of as a kind of genius for disappointment.” And his disappointment is rather “a particular kind of yearning” (*Tomorrow’s* 32). Thus, it is this particular kind of love/friendship—the dynamics of disappointments and longings—that seriously matters for Thoreau, both as a citizen and a writer. As we have seen, Thoreau’s friendship/love invariably entails disappointment and separation. He refuses a certain kind of access to the other, and yet this gesture of denial serves to both separate and unite. For Thoreau, who painfully recognizes the impossibility of intimate friendship/love in his present society, the Friend is nevertheless on the remotest horizon. This embeds a mark of promise in his theory of friendship—friends surely will appear at some point in future.

As recorded in his essays and lectures, Thoreau resisted not only the laws and society but also, and more importantly, social feelings—proper institutionalized emotions that are presumed as the foundations of human desire for social relationships, such as friendship and love.\(^\text{11}\) Thoreau critiqued institutionalized marriage: Indeed, he was a lifelong bachelor. The same thing can be said with his critique of socialized friendship, which “required us to give such proof of our affection” (279). Because of this, he laments, “What is commonly honored with the name of Friendship is no very profound or powerful instinct. Men do not, after all, love their Friends greatly” (265; italics original). True, Thoreau’s disappointment is derived from the unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the real, but the ideal is related to another kind of love, or a different form of love, than that which he meant by Friendship. However tragic this ideal friend, who Thoreau hopes to encounter, may be, Thoreau’s disappointment becomes the anticipation for future friends: “[Friendship] requires immaculate and godlike qualities full-grown, and exists at all only by condescension and anticipation of the remotest future” (276).
In an entry in his journal on May 21, 1851, Thoreau wrote: “The revelations of nature are infinitely glorious & cheering—hinting to us of a remotest future—of possibilities untold—but startlingly near to us some day we find a fellow man” (J,3: 229). Where Ralph Waldo Emerson describes ideal friends as “dreams and fables” (125), for Thoreau, they are more tragically hopeful. It is tragic because of the promissory forms of friendship—he only imagines the presence of friends somewhere other than where he is—and yet, it is hopeful precisely because these friends should arrive without exception. As Thoreau imagines, Friends “cherish each other’s hope. They are kind to each other’s dreams” (270). Thus, we can see how he might cherish the copies of his once published book, which were returned to his private chamber, where they might await their future readers.

Notes

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1 See Michael Gilmore, who sees A Week’s commercial failure as one of the factors that made Walden a better book (50).

2 Perry Miller demonstrates how in the early 1850s Thoreau’s Journal became “a deliberately constructed work of art” (4). Because of the commercial failure of A Week, Miller argues, Thoreau turned his attention to the making of a private book, his Journal. Developing Miller’s argument, Sharon Cameron contends that Thoreau “hoped for our eventual discovery and assessment of this work qua work” (16). Notwithstanding that the Journal was published posthumously, is now usually assessed as a private document, Cameron maintains that the Journal confounds the distinction between private and public (16). She then develops a thesis that takes the Journal away from what is commonly understood as its private purpose. However, Thoreau’s emphasis on the significance of privacy was not simply a response to the failure of A Week, as Miller and Cameron insist, but was one of his attributes that was consistent from his early career as a writer.

3 David Bergman included some of Thoreau’s journal entries in his recent anthology, Gay American Autobiography: Writings from Whitman to Sedaris (2009).

4 Given that the distinction between friendship and love was not strictly separated at that time, Thoreau’s confusion of the two subjects was not uncommon. However, he probably intends to confound love and friendship; or, more specifically, he was unable
to separate them. Thoreau argues about love and friendship in his letter to his friend, H. G. O. Blake. In “Chastity & Sensuality,” he writes, “Let us love by refusing not accepting one another” because “[there] is a danger that we may stain and pollute one another” (Thoreau, Early Essays 275, 276).

5 All references to A Week are from Thoreau, the Princeton edition of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

6 The consensus in scholarship on privacy in the nineteenth century is that it is a “public effect” (Margolis 3). See also Castiglia; Shamir.

7 Friendship may be an analogue to an exchange of letters. Emerson writes in his essay, “Friendship”: “To my friend I write a letter and from him I receive a letter” (124).

8 Scholars have long regarded Thoreau’s transcendental friendship as “blithely naïve and impossibly ideal” (Steel 136) and actually as inoperable on earth (Buell, “Transcendental” 17), giving emphasis to “the painful disparity between the real men he tried to befriend and the ideal they offered him instead” (Porte 103). For this scholarly criterion, the transcendental view of ideal friendship always already carries with it the risk of failure, going hand in hand with perpetual disappointment. However, such a view does not account for the potential of negative feelings such as disappointment, anxiety, irritation, and even loss at the core of Thoreau’s friendship. These negative feelings, I contend, are constitutive—not a failed consequence—of Thoreau’s philosophy of friendship. In other words, the most troubling aspects of transcendental friendship become the very foundation of the relation.

9 Reading for Thoreau is possibly a locus of intimacy; for example, Henry Abelove reads Walden’s famous scene as an implied moment of queer intimacy, in which Thoreau prompts Therein to read aloud from the Iliad and he translates for him “Achilles’s reproof” to his most intimate comrade, Patroclus (36).

10 Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of friendship structured the author-reader relationship at the heart of the reading experience. Different from the republican ideology of reading in which the relation to books was taken as “impersonal” (Warner, The Letters xiii), reading books became increasingly perceived as “recreating an author’s words in written form” and imagining that author as “talking to the reader” (W. Gilmore 40). That means the readers imagine themselves receiving a direct communication to the author. Gillian Silverman asserts that the act of reading in the nineteenth century created profound and intimate bonds between readers and authors, highlighting a way of thinking about reading that foregrounds intimacy and communion. Her study demonstrates that the metaphor of companionship—the book as friend—
characterized the preeminent trope of nineteenth-century reading practices and “the ability of reading to produce experiences of mental and bodily contact was typical of nineteenth-century American life” (2).

As argued by several critics such as Castiglia, Coviello (Intimacy), and Ivy Schweitzer, friendship as a disciplinary mode operated in a more institutionalized way to shape American culture and politics from the early- to mid-nineteenth century.

Works Cited
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