S U R V E Y I N G  T H E  E M P I R I C A L  S U L B I M E:  
T H O R E A U ,  L I T E R A R Y  A N D  S C I E N T I F I C 

R O B E R T  S .  F R I E D M A N 

The feeling was “indescribable”. Long before his epiphany on Mount Ktaadn, Maine, depicted in *The Maine Woods*, as catalytic contact with “Matter, vast, terrific …. the *solid* earth!, the *actual* world! The *common sense!* Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?”¹ Thoreau wrote of the “feelings”

... which come over one on first beholding this freak of nature [the summit of a beetling crag] .... The giddy height, the ironbound rock, the boundless horizon open around, and the beautiful river at your feet, with its green and sloping banks fringed with trees and shrubs of every description are calculated to excite in the beholder emotions of no common occurrence – to inspire him with vast and sublime conceptions.²

These early musings of sublimity are exemplary of Thoreau’s consistent striving toward realization of transcendental experience, a goal that many of his readers have recognized as being important to his literary work – his descriptions of seeking a sublime experience first and foremost contributed to his becoming a writer.

Competing for ascendancy (or prominence) recently, however, is a view that casts Thoreau in the role of scientist. Botanist, naturalist, geologist, even etymologist – Thoreau-as-poet has been staunchly and effectively challenged for primacy in the critical milieu. One hundred and fifty years since the publication of *Walden*, and almost fifty years since C.P. Snow’s lectures on the cultural divide between the

humanities and science, Thoreau criticism continues to move between the qualitative and quantitative poles in search of explanation, if not resolution, to the definition, if not origin, of Henry David Thoreau’s endeavour with language. Yet, as Sattelmeyer makes clear, the “disharmony between poetry and science, which we tend to assume as a given in our post-Darwinian, post-positivist world, did not yet prevail when Thoreau began his serious scientific study. It was on the horizon, to be sure, but his era – the 1840s and 1850s – was a time of great variety and uncertainty and excitement of competing paradigms and theories.”

During Thoreau’s time, for Scholnick, “science, art, and religion came to be associated as parallel, mutually reinforcing modes of exploration.” It may be that today’s disciplinary squabbling for ownership of Thoreau is merely projection of other contemporary academic anxieties, but we are in an age of classification divisions, subject specializations and disciplinary approaches to all facets of life that have grown ever more prominent.

In that ours is a world insisting on classifications that would have made Linnaeus blush, my aim is to demonstrate the coherence of the literary and scientific Thoreau. Our understanding of Thoreau as naturalist, I will argue, relies heavily upon our willingness to engage with Thoreau the poet through the metaphor of measurement, calculation and empirical observation. Yet even as metaphor is considered a mechanism useful, and in some cases essential, to constructing a bridge that spans the Snow divide between the humanities and the cognitive, social and physical sciences, for Thoreau metaphor is an even more important multi-purpose tool used for the fulfilment of a “Transcendental emotional experience” that Alfred Tauber finds for Thoreau to be of “paramount importance”: “The message Thoreau was most interested in transmitting pertained

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