

Thoreau: Mourning Turtle Doves

An amble from Concord on out

By Edward F. Mooney

Soon after John’s death I listened to a music-box, and if, at any time, that event had seemed inconsistent with the beauty and harmony of the universe, it was then gently constrained into the placid course of nature by those steady notes, in mild and unoffended tone echoing far and wide under the heavens. But I find these things more strange than sad to me. — *Thoreau, to Mrs. Lucy Brown, March 2, 1842*

... life, as if itself mourning, recovers losses by distributing them into other animated beings. — *Branka Arsic, “Thoreau and Benjamin on Mourning”*

Surely joy is the condition of life. — *Thoreau, “Natural History of Massachusetts”*

I.

There is a tension in Thoreau between celebration and lamentation. He laments the state of his society yet refuses, as he says in *Walden*, to produce an “ode to dejection.” Even when he faces the most despairing of circumstances, he sidesteps a descent into protracted melancholy. There is a

dark or tragic Thoreau, but you have to excavate a bit to find it. And you have to not be misled by the upbeat.

A striking case of his refusal of hopelessness—or helplessness—is chronicled in his essay, “Slavery in Massachusetts.” The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 forced the return of former slaves who had been de facto freedmen. As it began to take hold in Boston and around Concord, Thoreau wrote, “I cannot but believe that I am living in Hell.” Seeking to throw off despair, he takes a walk near a swamp he knows well. Suddenly he senses a lily rooted in the muck of history, but rising up as a tiny flower of paradise, sweet in its smell. His despair is modulated.

What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not so soon despair of the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man's deeds will smell as sweet. Such is the odor which the plant emits. If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her integrity and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, too, who is fitted to perceive and love it. It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily.

A near-tragic melancholy undergoes a catharsis, a transmutation toward affirmation and exultation.

A century and a half after Thoreau's death we think and create under the shadow of the Shoah, of the AIDS epidemic, the assassinations of the '60s, the war on terror that is its own terror. By my count, in the 70-odd years since Pearl Harbor, the US has been at war somewhere in the globe in every year but one. It's sobering to realize how many of the afflictions of Thoreau's times—genocide, racism, religious buffoonery, social and political alienation, environmental devastations—continue, unchecked, to this day. Thoreau suffers the afflictions of his times, and, as important, suffers pains of a much more personal nature. His brother John dies a grotesque death from lockjaw, writhing in spasms in Henry's arms. Two days later Henry displays identical jerking symptoms. John's death seems to have pulled or invited Henry into an identical hell. His body reenacts his brother's death. It wasn't long before his body shed the symptoms, but they continued

to feed Henry's writing.* *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* especially should be read as an act of mourning, as a soft-pedaled elegy to John.

II.

I propose an amble with Thoreau, keeping him usually in sight (not reined in), and letting him be sometimes conjured, rather than the subject of an exclusively scholarly, investigative report. There will be some polemic, a reverie or two, and thoughts on how we might teach others, our students or neighbors, what our walking companion has taught us. I don't write solely from a place of expertise, but from one of long acquaintance. This amble should dispel some preconceptions about Thoreau, and free me from the barriers that exclusively disciplinary and scholarly investigations so easily throw up around him. If I am out to de-familiarize him, that's in part because the Thoreau I have known over the years has slipped into shadow, as a new, less familiar Thoreau has come to light. My old Thoreau had become too easy and familiar—too tamed and domestic. Now I've come to know two new faces, both wild: Thoreau as "child of the mist" and Thoreau as a weather-beaten Bristlecone Pine.

Neither of these fall among the half a dozen familiar faces: Thoreau the environmentalist; Thoreau the antislavery activist; Thoreau the naturalist who sets a still-respected standard for biological and archaeological fieldwork; Thoreau an associate of The Transcendentalist Club, and much later, of the Occupy movement, and in between, the partisan of nonviolent resistance. His night in jail for refusing to pay taxes for an unjust imperialist land-grab was replicated, disseminated, and expanded in the eloquent disobedience first of Gandhi against the British, and

* His brother's death was something Henry was "never able to recover from," as William Eaton helpfully puts it, "yet in another sense, gave him his life's calling—or showed him the door to run through in wild, elegant, prophetic escape. And thus Thoreau's interplay between pain and recuperation, grief and celebration, sadness and delight remain compelling, and may be instructive for our present dark time." I thank him for this, and many other suggestions, all of which have made this a better essay.

then of Martin Luther King against the murderous customs of Jim Crow. Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" even had a 2011 cameo appearance in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem where the moral legitimacy of illegal action in protest of West Bank conditions was framed in its terms.* Then there is the folk hero Thoreau, the tiller of beans who raised a cabin by the pond by himself from recycled lumber. Since 1900 an estimated 2 million tourists have visited the replica of Thoreau's cabin at Walden. There was a time you could mail-order a replica to place in your back yard. His face is on posters, and in blue states is still required high-school reading.

I amble with a somewhat hidden Thoreau, one who undergoes tragic loss and recovers, finding delight, finding his voice in an enigmatic upbeat lament. The Bristlecone Pine, a tree of the West, is tragic in its weathered, twisted isolation, happy with its face to the breeze, and taking in incredible vistas that make the heart sing. I taught for decades within reach of California's Sierra Nevada. No doubt this feeds a recurrent dream in which Thoreau attains apotheosis as a Bristlecone Pine—that most gnarled and ancient and lonely of trees. Its wildness and musical wind-wrought twists makes it for me Thoreau's totem plant, his vital being. Thoreau knew Mt. Washington and the Berkshires, and would have enjoyed being farther west, especially a century past his death—a little more out of reach, a little more lost and mysterious. He would be displeased to learn that he had become as iconic as the legions of Mt. Washington hut boys, or as recognizable as the Boston Pops, nestled in the hills around Lenox. I think he'd prefer to appear as a Bristlecone, strikingly strange, self-sufficient, austere.

III.

"I thank God that the cheapness which appears in time and the world, the trivialness of the whole scheme of things, is in my own cheap and trivial moment." Thoreau wrote this in his journal in

* Back a year or so, Israeli women activists, resisting government policies that, they said, imprisoned West Bank Arab women, carried out acts of civil disobedience, citing Thoreau. They ferried Arab women in Israeli disguise through military checkpoints for a day at the seashore with their children. Many of these children had never seen the Mediterranean.

March 1842, a few months after his brother died. He seems to make cheapness and triviality—and why not cruelty or injustice?—a feature of his cheap mood of the moment. The correlate seems to be that the beauty or delight of things is likewise a feature of his mood—of his moment, as he says, even if that moment is no longer trivial but filled with awe. Is the implication that a change of mood would change the world?

I take the drift of Thoreau's journal remark, that his "own cheap and trivial moment" paints the world cheap and trivial, as a quick aside, of a morning when he is especially "down." Of course a better mood can indeed make a difference in many—not all—cases when the world is blue. But whatever the case with regard to the triviality of the world, when the issue is injustice, the matter runs deeper than any mood.

Remember Thoreau's approach to the sweet smelling lily in his antislavery essay. He had been in a terrible mood—for good reason: the infamous Dred Scott decision encouraged slave catchers to roam Concord's woods, Thoreau's back yard, in pursuit of likely pieces of escaped property listing toward Canadian freedom, or wishing to continue enjoying the relative freedom life around Boston afforded a one-time slave. Thoreau makes it clear that the facts of the matter, the raw injustice of it all (and not his bad mood), make his paradise revert to living hell.

As he encounters the lily, it gives him a scent of paradise. Heaven has a sweet odor as well as a sweet sound, and taste and look. Thoreau declares near the end of *A Week*, "We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish". The odor and glimpse of beauty amid ugliness redeems a moment of paradise amid hell. The hegemony of hell is broken. A lily, not a mood, makes the difference. The reality of injustice and cruelty is not erased, but for a moment it is not the only reality. If all we had were inescapable, bottomless, all-pervasive injustice, then Concord would in fact be utter desolation. The lily allows Thoreau to go on—despite tragedy. Outrageous moral facts are not all that obtrude. Injustice is neither all-pervasive nor fully triumphant in its reign. The lily brings Thoreau's heart alive—even as Dred Scott is its breaking.

Political worlds are not without bright moments, but there are also cruel ones, where injustice seems to be a brute and inexpugnable fact of the world. Injustice is heartbreaking and a cause for outrage in a way that the world’s “cheapness” and “triviality” aren’t. We needn’t be deflected by the metaphysical puzzle of how the world screams out injustices with an impact that is every bit as real as the impact of the table that I kick in irritation. The salient question is how, if injustice is real and seems inexpugnable, does Thoreau go on? It’s not just habit that keeps him moving, nor is it that he can abide injustice—he doesn’t. How does he live out, simultaneously, his deep outrage and deep delight? Can it be just a matter of sequencing: now outrage, now delight?

Thoreau’s picture of our tensed, dynamic, and somewhat stable living and abiding in fact mirrors our tensed, dynamic, and somewhat stable actual living and abiding. His painting reenacts actual moments that change with alteration of perspective as he poetically cultivates latent moments of delight amid darkness. But that’s not the whole story. Those moments don’t just alternate with moments of outrage or despair. They forestall, not the brute reality of cruelty or suffering but its crushing dominance, its unchallenged hegemony in consciousness and comportment. That there is evil is one thing. Whether it grinds the soul to dust is another.

IV.

Here is Thoreau at his most upbeat (in an 1856 letter to his devoted follower Harrison Gray Otis Blake): “I am grateful for what I am & have.” And he goes on, “My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite. . . . O how I laugh when I think of my vague and indefinite riches.” This mood seems far from the tragic, from all that might lead him to mourn. Thoreau is not just victim of his moods, contentment descending one day, anguish or outrage the next. Celebration and contentment are his achieved answer to real grounds for sorrow. He had no lack of reasons to grieve.

As a result of a small cut to his finger, John Thoreau died in his younger brother’s arms, violently. Thoreau then developed the symptoms. A doctor was called, but could do nothing and

the family prepared itself for a second grotesque death. The very same month Thoreau suffered another loss. Emerson's son Waldo, a boy Thoreau had helped raise, died at age 5 of scarlet fever. On a political level, Thoreau went to jail in protest of the United States' imperialist war and subsequent seizure of the northern half of Mexico.* Over decades, in a kind of ongoing grieving, he gathered Indian artifacts, preserving the memory of a vanquished people. Thoreau speaks ruefully in *A Week* of their eradication.

Some spring the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old gray stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil apple-tree to blossom next to the wild pine and the juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness. Their old stocks still remain. He culled the graceful elm from out the woods and from the river-side, and so refined and smoothed his village plot. He rudely bridged the stream, and drove his team afield into the river meadows, cut the wild grass, and laid bare the homes of beaver, otter, muskrat, and with the whetting of his scythe scared off the deer and bear. He set up a mill, and fields of English grain sprang in the virgin soil. And with his grain he scattered the seeds of the dandelion and the wild trefoil over the meadows, mingling his English flowers with the wild native ones. The bristling burdock, the sweet-scented catnip, and the humble yarrow planted themselves along his woodland road, they too seeking "freedom to worship God" in their way. And thus he plants a town. The white man's mullein soon reigned in Indian cornfields, and sweet-scented English grasses clothed the new soil. Where, then, could the Red Man set his foot? The honey-bee hummed through the Massachusetts woods, and sipped the wild-flowers round the Indian's wigwam, perchance unnoticed, when, with prophetic warning, it stung the Red child's hand, forerunner of that industrious tribe that was to come and pluck the wild-flower of his race up by the root.

To pull up by the root is to eradicate. At public meetings Thoreau gave voice to his ringing defense of John Brown, who had dared to act on his revulsion at slavery. He places Brown, the rebel who would be hanged, as the defender of a freedom that Washington and Franklin had failed to defend. He had reason to grieve for his country.

Thoreau had plenty to unnerve his courage, plenty to trigger the deepest disconsolations. Yet his outstanding achievement, in my view, is avoiding overweening lamentation or jeremiad.

* The land taken makes up much of present-day New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, Texas and western Colorado.

While keeping alive to the evil around him, he filtered his personal grief through the matrix of impersonal grief—the infinite grief of Nature herself.* He is absorbed by infinite patterns of Nature in grief—in an unending processing of decay, death, and regeneration. Nature can't but grieve limitlessly, yet she simultaneously gains new life from death. New roots sprout from warm earth, last year's decay.

Two months after John and Waldo died, Thoreau responds by letter to his friend Lucy Brown's sympathetic inquiry. His words (quoted also in one of the epigraphs to this essay) can seem austere and remote, far from heartbreak or lamentation. They weave Waldo's departure into impersonal grief.

As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn? He had not even taken root here. I was not startled to hear that he was dead; it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organization demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived. Neither will nature manifest any sorrow at his death, but soon the note of the lark will be heard down in the meadow, and fresh dandelions will spring from the old stocks where he plucked them last summer.

Waldo dies “as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through.” Ten years later, in his essay “Walking,” Thoreau writes that when it comes to knowledge, “we are all children of the mist.” It is as if he casts Waldo as the innocent child dispersed even as the sun burns through the mist. Later he casts himself as a child, peering through mist. Finally, he proposes that you and I are as children who see life-and-death only through mist, as we wonder at first and last things. With respect to knowledge of these so-significant infinities, we are none of us better placed to size up their significance than Waldo. Our lives come and go like a mist, or like the ephemeral song of the lark.

And why should Waldo’s “fine organization,” his perfection, “demand” an early death? Why should the sound of a perfect orchestral cadence demand that no note follow after? Why,

* Listen to Branka Arsic's brilliant account, “Magical Life: Thoreau and Benjamin on Nature in Mourning,” London Graduate School, recorded lecture, <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/05/branka-arsic-memorial-life-thoreau-and-benjamin-on-nature-in-mourning/>

when we experience perfection, do we so naturally say, “I knew then that I could die”? Is it that in its perfection, the moment can lose nothing through death? Of course, we readily say of so many good things that it’s better that they continue (rather than cease). Better that the grand oak, or granite wall, not crumple or rot.

Consider a clap of thunder, a sudden cloudburst, the ring of a bell, the brush of a kiss, the fall of the sun into the sea. Waldo is the dispersal of the mist, as wonderful and necessary as the falling sun, or the refusal of sunrise to linger. So why begrudge Thoreau’s rendering the sudden death of Waldo this way? Well, we distinguish early death from death at great age, and distinguish both from death arriving in between. But is it “unnatural” to die at 5 rather than 25 or 85? Given his perfect constitution, Waldo’s death would be perfect no matter when he died. He was a perfect specimen at 5 and his death did not mar that perfection. Had he died at 25 that death would not have marred his perfection.

I sense Thoreau merges with Waldo here, as he merged just weeks earlier with John, at John’s death. That capacity to undergo multiple deaths can make him seem austere and ancient, like the Bristlecone. It takes a steely courage to enter the underworld with those we love. But that capacity also makes him young, for he emerges each time renewed. And as he descends with Waldo, he descends as a child of the mist—and re-enters as a child of the mist, ready to share the child’s awakening.

Thoreau lives under the prerogatives of the seer or poet to evoke the anomalous, to bend imagination, to evoke, reveal, and revel in, wild time, wild place, and morphing embodiment. He confides in his Journal (March 27, 1842), “I am as old—as old as the Alleghenies.” Or, as old as a Bristlecone. Then he plays with the alternative: “I was going to say Wachusett, but it excites a youthful feeling—as I were but too happy to be so young.” If he utterly disowns being young and happy, why mention it here? I suspect he takes himself to be young and happy *and* old and austere. Time and embodiment are anomalous. He deigns to shape them both ways.

V.

Thoreau can seem neighborly and contemporary, and simultaneously removed and distant. That he eludes us—while also being overwhelmingly present—mirrors his sense that he is lost to his neighbor—while also being overwhelmingly present. I discovered his remoteness barely half a dozen years ago. Earlier he was not lost to me (so I thought), and it never would have occurred to me that he was lost to himself, that he yearned or mourned. I presumed too close an acquaintance. I assumed he was already my easy companion and confidant.

Thoreau's appearance was nothing if not strong and self-sufficient—what an adolescent needs. He had the answers; they were simple. I swelled with pride as he taunted Emerson standing there outside the jail, while Thoreau, on principle, sat within. I knew he was a neighbor from a few towns over who knew the Concord as I knew the Charles. We would both rather be walking Sunday morning than conforming as tame, observant Christians. And I knew he liked—how shall I say—camping! In my flawless wisdom he was a known quantity. I approved, and had nothing to learn.

Through college, and then many years teaching college, things changed, but not radically. Gradually Thoreau entered a nostalgic dream world. He became a first love, fondly remembered, a kid's fantasy figure. I had, of course, moved on to more “challenging” figures. Thoreau was a wordsmith, but “not a real thinker”—so my learned philosophy professors made clear. He was OK for Sierra Club posters and summer reading at the beach, but frankly he was not a first-rate, exact, and un-fuzzy thinker. My teachers would not have known the high esteem in which George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Hadot held Thoreau's writing and thinking. Philosophers then were tilting toward positivism, and learning to scoff at the provincial inelegance of William James, for instance. Emerson and Thoreau were not on the map.

My acquired condescension was shaken when I heard Stanley Cavell, surely a first-rate

philosopher, lecture on *Walden* in the '70s. But I took Cavell's interest to be quirky, an extravagant side-interest that only an aristocratic Harvard Professor could indulge. A grad student or young professor had better stay clear.

Quite by accident, decades later, I reopened Cavell-on-Thoreau (*The Senses of Walden*). I began reading *A Week on the Concord, Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod*—in growing rapture, then in a scattered, devouring rush.* Leafing almost randomly through Thoreau's Journals, I could pause with this (from February 12, 1851):

There is something more than [atoms in] association at the bottom of the excitement which the roar of a cataract produces. It is allied to the circulation in our veins. We have a waterfall which corresponds even to Niagara somewhere within us. It is astonishing what a rush and tumult a slight inclination will produce in a swollen brook. How it proclaims its glee, its boisterousness, rushing headlong in its prodigal course as if it would exhaust itself in half an hour! How it spends itself! I would say to the orator and poet, Flow freely and lavishly as a brook that is full—without stint.

This lavish tumult was answer—or at least promise. And it was but one of hundreds of intoxicating passages. It let the grip of an earlier persona—the suspicious and detached refutation machine—quietly bite the dust. A kind of freer-thinking poet waited in the wings. When it came to (philosophical) knowledge (Thoreau would whisper) we are all sorely lacking, and we are all no more than “children of the mist.” With such promise, I read lavishly on—not to dispel cognitive opacity or fill information-gaps, but frankly to relish the moment of awakening, renewed again and again, page by singing page.

VI.

We write elegies to the lost, to those we've lost. Thoreau wrote elegies to his losses. His little-read masterpiece *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was written while he was living on Walden Pond. It is an elegy to his brother John, who had died several years earlier.[†] In 1839 the brothers

* In retrospect, my late discovery was prepared by years with Henry Bugbee's classic, *The Inward Morning*.

† *A Week* was first published in 1852, *Walden* in 1854.

had taken a river trip down the Concord and up the Merrimack to the base of the White Mountains in New Hampshire. They had sought, as it were, the seat of the gods, and the source of local waters, of the ice-melts flowing down to the sea.

A Week can seem anything but an elegy—hardly more than a piece of travel writing, or perhaps a commonplace book, a compendium of paragraphs collected over time by a diligent reader. There are notes on literature, followed by Thoreau’s poems, New England history, comments on friendship, the church, “Eastern wisdom” (the *Bhagavad Gita*), and so forth. Apart from a broad dedication hint, one wouldn’t guess that the mate of his life is dead. The dedication pleads “Be thou my muse, oh brother.” There are no tears.

Thoreau doesn’t write to “work through” or “get over” his pain. His writing weaves grief in and out of all natural life. It is not something to work through and leave behind any more than life is something to work through and leave behind.* All Nature is in a state of illimitable grief, registered in the loss of weeping leaves, in the stoic sadness of rotting stumps, in the quiet of night and the song-burst of new light—its newness soon to pass. Grief and new life course through the being of all we encounter. In the chapter “Spring” in *Walden*, Thoreau discovers the stench of a dead horse, a site of mourning that stores provision for scavengers, and so a site for new life.

We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another: that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! . . . The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence.

* Once more, hear Branka Arsic unraveling the ontology of impersonal mourning:
<http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/05/branka-arsic-memorial-life-thoreau-and-benjamin-on-nature-in-mourning/>.

There's no little irony afoot here, I think—a bit of hyperbole as Thoreau theatrically relishes what will seem shocking and uncouth to a strait-laced aunt shopping for Sunday dinner. (But his neighbor just west, Emily Dickinson, would smile appreciatively I'd guess.)

Thoreau invites his readers to see that ordinary, episodic, personal mourning—centered on a more or less localized loss—is self-centered, and the proper course (metaphysically, religiously) is to see Nature's cycles of death, the raining of flesh and blood, as somehow innocent, and not aimed at harming any one creature or corner of life as against others. Then one is free to countenance something wider than local devastation and personal grief or lamentation.

As we have seen, Thoreau mourns unselfishly, not as if he alone suffers. He mourns as a participant in a deeper, largely unnoticed impersonal grieving. You might think this is just a tactic for avoiding, or deflecting, unbearable loss. Perhaps. On the other hand, Thoreau sketches an ontological mourning that is of interest independently of its genesis in pain—rather than what? Could such an ontological view be rooted in detached contemplation, or idle pleasantry? Why should deflection—if the view does deflect—be a reason to dismiss the worth of the view? Impersonal grief is an all-pervasive sadness that permeates mountains and seas. In Thoreau's book *Cape Cod* we find the now calm ocean waves call out to a shore-tossed, drowned Margaret Fuller.

In *A Week* Mt. Greylock provides coffins for night visitors, and, in *Walden*, Thoreau is fascinated by a cut for the rail tracks in the bluff just up from the pond; he sees the sand thereby exposed as alive, excreting and also weeping with the spring thaw. Trees sorrow in wind, skies weep, rocks cry out as they split from a wall. Is this personification gone mad? Yet Thoreau expects of us, and reports his own, radical conversion. Rather than bowing to the authority of a judge enforcing the laws against uncivil pathetic fallacies, he suggests civil resistance: we appeal to higher laws, and accuse this judge (and his likes) of a spiritually dangerous and invidious *apathetic* fallacy.

It's easy enough to burden Thoreau with the charge of projecting human grief onto flat, unfeeling surfaces of unfeeling stuff. Galileo gives us dead matter (the atom or the billiard ball) that

neither grieves nor disowns grief; his cosmos gloriously free of pathos, a teeming, spinning whirl of stuff without meanings to share. Thoreau awakens to a dawn that inspires, instructs, heartens. He abjures spinning stuff and embraces swirling, fining fish—works to join them, his swimming totem creatures. He delivers revelation through the mist, and invites conversion. If my muse hears his, if his revelation becomes ours, we together behold. We are shattered to behold what we had hitherto only peered at or scanned or scrutinized in an ocular squint. Revelations shatter, crush, and restore. Something gets accomplished poetically. These are moments to revel in.

Thoreau's witness to revelation, in this instance, would have us behold familiar human grief as a glancing participation in a largely unnoticed or repressed wider primal phenomenon—mourning running deeper than familiar human responsiveness, coursing throughout Nature, inhering ontologically in every crack and cranny of everything. We behold Nature always and forever living, moving and being in perfect mourning. Branka Arsic is right. We have and are grateful for Thoreau's witness. He beholds Nature mourning, and nothing is more real—other than Nature's equally primordial delight in birth.*

In a collegial aside, my editor, William Eaton, asked, “Wouldn’t we love to also have the manuscript Thoreau never wrote: the book about his feelings for his brother? And what a different person he would have been if he had been able to write that book!” True! Yet are we unhappy with the austere and prophetic Thoreau we now have?

Imagine a writer, perhaps a counter-Plato, who turns the tables on the received version of Socrates’s death. We should admire Socrates even more, it is suggested, if he had not deflected personal grief (as Thoreau did)—if he had not turned away from his feelings (and from his friends’, his wife’s, his sons’ feelings) to enter a detached dialectical discussion with two strangers. Yet Plato makes the deflection of pathos integral to a magnificent vision of immortality, and Thoreau makes a flight (if that’s what it is) from personal feelings integral to a magnificent ontology, a vision of

* This might be a modulation of the Christian tenet that God weeps over His creation—notwithstanding the fact that, as the King James Bible tells us early on, “God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

Nature mourning. If either Plato-Socrates or Thoreau pursued his local feelings of grief, then we would lose the writers we know and celebrate, and the world would be less for that. Thoreau loved Hamlet's wild thinking.* Perhaps we should love Thoreau's thinking for its wildness.

VII.

Looking at an emerging industrial and administrative era, Marx, Thoreau, Weber, and any number of Romantics mourn the loss of a vibrant core of living things. Trees become board-feet to sell; meadows become sites for new housing; mountains become obstacles to throughways and railways; oceans hold harvests of profitable fish, and provide sites for deep-water drilling or wind power. Nature increasingly becomes a resource for exploitation. It loses its status as Creation—as a plenum infused with value all its own, a plenum of things wondrous or terrible, but in any case there-for-themselves, for a glory not of our making. As we have seen, it is not only the landscape in view that has become disenchanted; tragically, we viewers, too, have been stripped down to instruments, clever “organizations” that instrumentalize, cannibalize, themselves. As Thoreau famously put it in the first chapter of *Walden*, “Men have become the tools of their tools.”

In academia, which I shall come back to yet again and soon enough, we corral texts, push them through chutes, to be tranquilized and packaged by theory. Our jargon shrink-wraps the vitality of creatures and creations in abstract flourishes, labeled with in-group codes. A text becomes a business opportunity, a chance to apply technique to living speech, extracting material, stuff, for which there's a market value, declared by journal editors and chairs of tenure committees. Thank God Thoreau is so much more than a research niche. He's a wild pandemonium or a contemplative row on the river, or a race across pond ice in stride with a fox. He refuses to be processed as a slew of beans. And so far as academe is concerned, he is dismissed because he won't

* See Thoreau's essay “Walking.”

abide what the knowledge-industrial-complex so dogmatically and wrong-headedly knows: exuberant, transformative knowledge isn't knowledge.

In his essay "Wild Apples" Thoreau situates his growing disenchantment with the modern world in the emergence of orchards and disappearance of such wild apples. Clearing land and planting in rows regiments the apple harvest. Crews walk straight-and-narrow corridors, collecting by the bushel. Trees aren't variously mixed in mosaics, with other sorts here and there, in their own disordered place and wild patterns. Confining apples in orchards provides an easy supply of a single kind or two. This means the profusion of wild apples will disappear, and kids will grow up thinking apples are grown in a barrel (or on Styrofoam trays), with a choice of only a few. Thoreau could name dozens of varieties just around Concord, and listed even more when he traveled to Minnesota later on for his health.

He gets quite ecstatic describing the taste of an "ice apple"—an apple that doesn't fall but freezes on the branches in winter, then with "the usual January thaw" unfreezing, the juice within now fermented. So you bite into a little hard cider fresh from the tree. He liked the "buzz" it delivered (my word, not his) and laughed at the Puritan disapproval of all drink. Each tree produced apples spiked slightly differently. The experience was somewhat like wine tasting, except it was free, and free from snobbery. And there was enchantment in wild apples.

VIII.

I come at last to disenchantments not of Nature or of society generally, but of the administrative regimes of academia—cubicles squared up for specialized research programs; thoughts and texts chopped into bits; feelings for the living whole of things, cognitive and affective, sidelined or gently mocked; feelings partitioned off from thinking, and thinking from feeling. We privilege the analytical and critical and rule out sensing a text as a revelation to behold, letting words burrow and transform. Secular higher education has—for the flimsiest of reasons—abandoned to Church,

family, the streets, or entertainment what might pass as transformative, regenerative, or redeeming insight, revelation, or knowledge.

Some rare enchantment survives, periodically acknowledged in humanities classrooms, where we can float love of wonder, openness to surprise, acknowledgment of the enigmatic and mysterious, and where we can, on occasion, allow song and poetry to rise above analysis and calculation. We might find room for Basho's fish to cry, or Thoreau's creeks to whisper, or loons to laugh. But is this really legitimate in an institution dedicated, it seems, to the acquisition and transmission of useful knowledge? If we feel the losses of discord, the passions of outrage or varieties of awakening or religious ecstasy, we'd best not boast.

Let's just say that Thoreau is good for the soul, and for preserving bushels of insight we have hardly begun to taste. In place of instrumental knowledge and reason we have Thoreau's exuberant knowledge that conveys the not-yet fully lost enchantments of sounds and rhythms of sentences and texts, finding a vibrancy echoing on into the morning free from the moorings of theory, ready for redemptive revelations of lilies rising up through the muck.

IX.

"I long ago lost a hound and a bay horse and a turtle dove," Thoreau wrote in the first chapter of *Walden*, and the line has often been read as a scholarly riddle to be solved. What might hound, horse and turtle dove represent? What if that line evokes rather an existential condition of abandonment and loss, evoking Thoreau's presence as a writer intimate with separation and loss? How does he survive loss of a brother, a child, an innocence? Of the latter, he writes in "Slavery in Massachusetts," "The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her."

"I long ago lost a hound and a bay horse and a turtle dove." If we speak that sentence slowly, feelingly, the vowels fall in the rhythms of sighs, sighs of lament: Ah *la* ta ta *la* [I long ago

lost]. And “turtle dove” is “turtle” not because of a shell, but because it softly sings “tu, tu, tutu” that is, “coo coo, coo coo.” The coos of love can be coos of greeting, but also the coos of lament and love lost, the dove calling out, grieving, for its love. This is the materiality of verse, of the text, the grittiness of non-angelic voice—Thoreau’s vital materiality. “Child of the mist,” or Bristlecone, he is neither diaphanous angel nor hard as a rock but a creature of loss. That loss is ours if we follow—venture to undergo impersonal yearning, immersed in pervasive disquiet yet uttered in delight. We share a sigh, let’s say, of delight in parting.

Afterword

I note the heartening surge of interest in things Thoreau including:

- Thoreau events (the Thoreau section of the American Literature Association’s Annual Meetings, and the amazing Thoreau Society Annual Gatherings in Concord) and Thoreau’s presence at the Society for Continental Philosophy and Theology.
- The retrieval, spearheaded by Pierre Hadot, of philosophy as spiritual exercise aimed at changing one’s life (with Thoreau’s walks and writing offering a key example).
- Andrea Nightingale’s essays on Thoreau and environmentalism and her article on “Auto-hagiography in Augustine and Thoreau,” and Robert Pogue Harrison’s eloquent writing on Thoreau and Heidegger in his inimitable *Forests*.
- Branka Arsic’s and Laura Walls’s biographies of Thoreau, ready to appear any day. Branka is richly indebted to Cavell, and revitalizes vitalism, and Laura, like no one else, can get natural science and literary evocation to dance the same dance.
- Having spent decades in philosophy departments, where Thoreau has been persona non grata, I am heartened to see Rick Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth and James Reid’s collection, *Thoreau’s Importance for Philosophy*, come out this year from Fordham.

- An NEH Summer Institute in Florence on Leonardo da Vinci “between science and artist.”

Can an Institute on Thoreau as Artist-Scientist be far behind?