Thoreau’s Death

by Lawrence Buell

In retrospect it seems hard to conceive of Thoreau’s last illness as anything other than a tragic curtailment, struck down as he was in his prime by the curse of tuberculosis that dogged his family, indeed nineteenth-century New England as a whole. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s funeral eulogy set the tone for later remembrances of his premature death (as an “indignity to so noble a soul” to “leave in the midst his broken task which none else can finish”) generally echoed by modern Thoreauvians, as in Robert Milder’s characterization of “Thoreau the poet-scientist just beginning to discover his subject and angle of vision when he died” at the end of his insightful bio-critical study. Yet Thoreau himself seemed to experience his own passing rather differently. Despite sporadic outbreaks of distress during the seventeen months when the cold he caught in December 1860 became dismaying and finally lethal, he bore up with a minimum of recrimination and a maximum of resignation, composure, and even good cheer. “Henry accepts this dispensation,” his sister and primary caregiver Sophia declared one month before the end, “with such childlike trust and is so happy that I feel as if he were being translated rather than dying in the way of most mortals.”

Such affirmations must of course be partly discounted as the conventional rhetoric of mid-Victorian deathbed consolation for the sake of propping up the spirits of Thoreau’s circle of family and friends. Nor is it hard for a resolute close reader to detect vexation and anxiety bordering on panic in such comments as Abigail Alcott’s “He is very calm, but earnest about everything as if his moments were numbered” and Sophia Thoreau’s “He did not cease to call for his manuscripts until the last day of his life.” Still, the weight of surviving testimony combined with Thoreau’s own last dictated letters suggests that he remained staunch to a degree most mortals might envy in the face of approaching death. The report of his ex-jailor and friend Sam Staples to Emerson six weeks before the end was doubtless sincere and likely pretty accurate: “Never saw a man dying with so much pleasure & peace.” Depending on who was watching, Thoreau’s dying seemed to fulfill every then-available template for the “good death”: the traditional Protestant tradition of “holy dying” (“This is a beautiful world, but soon I shall see a fairer”), the post-Protestant sentimentalist (“his perfect contentment was truly wonderful”), and the stoical-agnostic (“One world at a time”).5

As the youngest Peabody sister told her middle sibling Sophia Hawthorne, the fact that Thoreau seemed “just as happy [as ever] in the presence of death” was all “the more remarkable” for his being “still in the prime of life, with a vivid sense of its enjoyments.” Even after allowing for hyperbole, it seems clear that to conceive Thoreau’s last months of increasingly housebound and bed-ridden existence as a tragically anti-climactic period, is seriously at odds with the impressions of those around him about how he himself experienced his passing. Whatever Thoreau scholars have thought, he himself does not seem to have looked upon his “untimely” death as a closure out of keeping with the rest of his life. Why should that have been so? Can we dare to take Thoreau’s “exemplary” death as an instructive confirmation of the validity, at least for Thoreau, of his “philosophy”?6

Veteran Thoreau biographer Walter Harding thought not. He favored a materialist explanation. “The noble resignation”7 of Thoreau’s last months seemed to Harding a “characteristic of the last days of most victims of tuberculosis” that “perhaps can be accounted for as a chemical reaction of some type.” This line of thinking is supported, up to a point, by a number of nineteenth-century instances of sentimental-dying recorded by historians as well as by fictional renditions such as the death of little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. But it remains, another historian observes, that tuberculosis, which slowly eats the lungs from “the inside out,” dissolving tissue into suffocating fluid, is “an awful way to die,” painful and drawn out. To bear it as Thoreau did arguably requires great inner resources as well as reinforcing social support. Even though Thoreau’s sexagenarian father, to whom Henry had lovingly ministered in his last illness little more than a year before he himself fell ill, seems to have been
a model of peaceful death from consumption, that in itself was no
guarantee that the forty-something son would also go gentle into
that good night.

Two recent studies offer ways of understanding Thoreau's
acceptance of death that are more intrinsic to his known convictions.
For Branca Arsić, the answer lies in Thoreau's distinctive brand of
vitalist philosophy, which reckoned death as "a process of
deforation but not of cessation . . . enabling us to experience
finitude while ushering us into what remains animated." Audrey
Raden concurs in this general line of reasoning ("Nature is always
dying: Henry David Thoreau knew this and spent his entire life
saying good-bye"), but further observes that Thoreau always
admired resolution in the face of death, in particular John Brown's
willing and dignified embrace of martyrdom "at the proper moment
of ripeness."16 To their perceptive suggestions, I'd propose some
complications and additions.

First, whatever Thoreau's mature views of death and dying, it
seems clear that they did not solidify until after his mid-20s, if ever.
The summer after the wrenching experience of nursing his brother
John through his agonizing death by lockjaw and living at second-
hand through little Waldo Emerson's death from scarlet fever a
few weeks later, we find Thoreau wondering out loud to his near-
peer and fellow former Concord schoolteacher Isaiah Thornton
Williams whether Emerson's "philosophy [came] to his aid as
does the Christian Faith" to traditional believers. Acknowledging
that "the consolations that a Christian faith afford the bereaved &
afflicted is one of the strongest holds upon my credulity," Thoreau
adds that "if there is consolation" from Emersonian philosophy
"in trials like those—it will do much toward settling my belief—I
wish to know minutely on this point."17 Here Thoreau anticipates
the kind of hesitation that Hawthorne famously saw in Melville: he
could neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief. He teeters
on the verge of disengaging from an inherited Christian framework
for the sake of the Emersonian post-supernatural alternative that
feels attractive but questionable.

That Thoreau's recorded dying words point in both directions
suggests he may never have fully resolved that spiritual crisis of
1842. However that may be, urgency about cracking the riddle
of death seems to have diminished into a basic acquiescence to
the inevitable mystery of the unknowable that resurfaces again
and again throughout his writing. Arsić and Raden rightly stress
the persistence of elegiac moods throughout Thoreau's writing,
although some summary pronouncements as "Thoreau's lifelong
performance of the poetics of perpetual mourning" and "boyhood
and its loss are everywhere in the Journal" seem somewhat
overstated.18 Beyond any such long-term philosophic ruminations
about death and life, however, beyond the significance of
e exemplary models of how to die nobly (John Brown, John Thoreau
Sr., also John Thoreau Jr.), at least two other circumstances of the
last few months of Thoreau's life might have eased his passing.
One seems incontestable, the other more speculative yet also
worth considering.

In the first place, all evidence suggests that despite his
propensities to solitary crankiness, Thoreau was immensely
comforted not to die alone but rather ensconced in the Thoreau
parlor, surrounded by family members and visited by a host of
caring friends and neighbors. Sophia's recollection of her dear
brother's last weeks verges on the saccharine, but she scarcely
exaggerated in claiming that the whole "town was moved to
minister to his comfort," old and young, with visits and gifts, down
to a sprig of lilac brought by Judge Hoar the day he died. Thoreau
was clearly touched, delighted, and affirmed by all this attention,
which seems to have come as surprising and welcome reassurance
that his neighbors didn't think of him as the outsider he thought of
himself as being. As Laura Dassow Walls sums up, "The universal
kindness brought out the side of Henry he hid from all but his
most trusted friends."19 So the valetudinarian Thoreau became
much more visibly sociable, urging his family to invite in the local
children as well as the adults. Sophia may have exaggerated a wee
bit when she quoted him as declaring "I should be ashamed to
stay in this world after so much has been done for me. I never
could repay my friends."20 But without a doubt, the warm support
of others, old and young, local and distant, was crucial in helping
the hermit of Walden to die in peace.

A far more speculative line of explanation, but perhaps worth
considering nonetheless, is that despite the dying Thoreau's
obvious anxiety about moving as much of his unpublished writing
as possible toward a semblance of closure he might have derived
some sense of relief if not absolute contentment from breaking the
metaphorical log jam. Here I shamelessly yield to the temptation
to inflate readerly gratitude with biographical actuality. For
certain it is that Thoreau's readers are hugely in his debt for
bravely fighting in the face of increasing debility to push so much
of his unpublished work toward the finish line: "Life without
Principle" and the great mature Excursions essays from "Walking"
to "Autumnal Tints," and two book projects, Cape Cod and The
Maine Woods. Much more remained in rougher intermediate form,
to be sure, such as the manuscripts published as The Dispersion
of Seeds and Wild Fruits at the very end of the twentieth century.
Nonetheless, counting the two travel books and the previously-
unpublished essays in Reform Papers and Excursions, Thoreau's
labors of revision during the last half-year of his life—well after
his last Journal entry—precipitated a more sizeable and variegated
spate of published work than in any suchlike span during his
literary lifetime. By that yardstick, Thoreau's final months must
be reckoned his most productive. Perceiving that, especially if
one suspects as I do that the mid-life Thoreau might never have
been able to bring himself to move to bring his data-coll ecting and
ruminations to closure without such a traumatic precipitating event
as imminent death, one can't help wondering—although it can
never be proven either way—whether Thoreau might have seen
some silver lining within the darkening cloud of mortal illness.

Be that as it may, when the time came, after he realized—
probably late in 1861—that he was indeed doomed, never once is
Thoreau recorded as complaining that his death was untimely. Not
that he can be said to have languished and died without complaint.
On the contrary, his letters before and after his summer 1861 trip
to Minnesota show recurring distress about his debility. But what
Thoreau's life record does seem to bear out is that he exemplified,
impressively, his own takeaway reflection in the wake of his
brother's death: "The death of friends should inspire us as much
as their lives."21 If, as Socrates and Cicero declared and Montaigne
reiterated, to philosophize is to learn to die, Thoreau seems to have
done just that.

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