



Thoreau and Health: Physician, Naturalist, Metaphysician

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The Eudaimonic Turn

Well-Being in Literary Studies

Edited by James O. Pawelski and D. J. Moores



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For Suzie and Liam (J.O.P)

And for Tatsiana (D.J.M.)

with love and gratitude

"Their fundamental faith simply has to be that society must *not* exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being—comparable to those sun-seeking vines of Java . . . that so long and so often enclasp an oak tree with their tendrils until eventually, high above it but supported by it, they can unfold their crowns in the open light and display their happiness." (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 213)

36. I labor to introduce collage because Rancière is often quite good on collage, especially on its transformations in contemporary art (Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 46–47; 55). But he refuses to acknowledge how collage especially creates the space where we have to be concerned with intentions and purposiveness and individual acts of valuation. Collage in fact is probably the best example of how in modernism the central quality is not sensuousness but a literalness that fuses the senses with imaginative states insistent on their own capacity to confer meaning within the sensuous.

37. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 230.

38. Sartre developed a version of this logic when he argued that one cannot be sincere and direct because the effort to be sincere requires fidelity to an idea that is not an aspect of the concrete situation.

39. The very next section after the passage I quote on moral forgery defines a philosopher as one who "is struck by his own thoughts as if they came from the outside," followed by the inevitable play on what is metaphor and what is literal: "who is perhaps himself a storm pregnant with new lightnings" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 230).

40. Had I the space I would elaborate the consequences of Nietzsche's commitment to the future. The first is his sense that the originality of unmasking Christian Morality "breaks the history of mankind into two parts. One lives before him, one lives after him" (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 133). This originality entails that the time before him will be alien, and those at home in it will be incapable of understanding the prophet. The prophet depends on the future for vindication. This dependency is first of a straightforward need for readers that will allay the prophet's utter loneliness. But there is also a richer dependency because only those readers will in fact show "how one becomes what one is" because only they will be able to match the prophet's words with reality and recognize that in fact the writer was prophetic. Only in the future will the evil man be allowed to become the affirmative character he always was (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 134).

TWO

Thoreau and Health

Physician, Naturalist, Metaphysician

James Engell

I feel that I draw nearest to understanding the great secret of my life in my closest intercourse with nature. There is a reality and health in (present) nature; which is not to be found in any religion—and cannot be contemplated in antiquity—I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature.

—Thoreau, *Journal* entry for October 30, 1842 (*Journal* 2, 55)

In his "Conclusions" to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James states that nature "interpreted religiously" must not be merely "the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression," but must reveal, "over and above the altered expression, a natural constitution different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required. . . . It is only transcendentalist metaphysicians who think that, without adding any concrete details to Nature, or subtracting any, but by simply calling it the expression of absolute spirit, you make it more divine just as it stands."¹

In his phrase "interpreted religiously," James takes *religiously* in the way that spiritual life is experienced daily, practically, by one individual, how it's felt on the pulse and in the heart, not how it's memorized or merely repeated from others or from institutions.

Thoreau experienced and then expressed a natural constitution of the world, a constitution of Nature, different from that which a baldly materialistic world would present. He experienced the natural world as a form

of health, of human health, and even as a kind of heaven. Thoreau is a transcendentalist physician who calls those who would hear him to a pragmatic insight and healing, one that interprets nature and diagnoses our own ills. He does so in a way that reorients how we conceive of the "natural constitution" of the environment and our own natural constitutions together. This reorientation, he believes, brings us to better health mentally and physically.

Throughout his *Journal* and in work published both during his lifetime and posthumously, Thoreau wrote about health. It is a constant subject. Yet, he never collected his many reflections on health in one concentrated essay or chapter. Instead, health in all its interrelated aspects—physical, mental, spiritual, the senses, nutrition, and ethical well-being—informs just about all that he wrote, much in the way that a heartbeat sustains us all day but may not be noticed or studied consciously. A few years after Thoreau died at age forty-four, James Russell Lowell, apparently still piqued by Thoreau's attitude to Lowell's actions as periodical editor of Thoreau's narrative on the Maine woods, remarked, "Mr. Thoreau had not a healthy mind, or he would not have been so fond of prescribing. His whole life was a search for the doctor." Lowell addresses Thoreau's vision of nature and continues the medical image: "We look upon a great deal of the modern sentimentalism about Nature as a mark of disease." It is a disease that Lowell claims has taken as its victims "sentimentalists, unreal men, misanthropes on the spindle side." Despite this animus, Lowell closes on notes of praise. "His whole life," says Lowell, repeating that phrase he had just used in a negative context, "was a rebuke of the waste and aimlessness of our American luxury, which is an enslavement to tawdry upholstery." There is something of the diagnostician that Lowell sees in Thoreau, too: "he had watched Nature like a detective who is to go upon the stand; as we read him, it seems as if all-out-of-doors had kept a diary and become its own Montaigne." The printed "leaves" of Thoreau's writing, concludes Lowell in a lovely image, especially appropriate given Thoreau's enchantment with the leaf as emblematic of many natural processes and systems, "shed their invisible thought-seed like ferns."² If someone's vision causes such strong reactions—denial and affirmation—it seems worth attending to with care.

Yet, despite the prevalence of Thoreau's concern for health as a form of human flourishing; only one treatment touching it has appeared in literary journals, and that in a fairly specialized form more than sixty years ago.³ Preparing this essay, originally given at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering in Concord, Massachusetts, in July 2010, I located only two other pertinent studies, one in the journal *Literature and Medicine*, the second in the journal *Environmental Values*.⁴ Both these interdisciplinary essays recognize that Thoreau's writing on health connects profoundly with environmental concerns and offers much to modern medical understanding and behavior. So, too, in a more scattered but perceptive way

does Robert D. Richardson, Jr.'s *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*.⁵ In short, Thoreau's ideas about health have not been nullified by scientific and medical advances. Because they focus on human relationships to the environment and *its* health, his ideas have grown more urgent and valuable.

HEALTH AND NATURE, IDEAL AND REAL

Two brief statements from Thoreau's *Journal* during 1853 and 1854 sum up his insistence on human health as fully realized only in relation to the sustainable health of the larger environment and the ecosystems that surround and sustain us: "For all nature is doing her best each moment to make us well—she exists for no other end, Do not resist her. . . Why nature is but another name for health" and "Health is a sound relation to nature."⁶ These rather cryptic statements Thoreau had earlier foreshadowed in his "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), where he claims, "In society you will not find health but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid." Regarding society—human beings acting in isolation from nature—he says, "There is no scent in it so wholesome as that of the pines, nor any fragrance so penetrating and restorative as the life-everlasting in high pastures." It is not only the direct contact of the senses, it is also the mental knowledge of natural processes that together provide a tonic. A combination of the directly empirical and the conceptual or even ideal is key. "I would keep some book of natural history always by me as a sort of elixir, the reading of which should restore tone to the system. To the sick, indeed, nature is sick, but to the well, a fountain of health."⁷

That last sentence suggests that our own state of being governs how we view our relation to nature; it is when we are healthy that nature provides an almost unconscious source of strength, "a fountain of health." This helps explain Thoreau's remark in his *Journal* that "Only the convalescent are conscious of the health of nature."⁸ Only as we become aware of an improvement in the changing state of our own health (and therefore are most concerned about its progress) do we grasp that nature untouched by "society" holds a reservoir of well-being. In "Walking," Thoreau confessed his own experience of a mode of constant convalescence, or rather, of ongoing preventive care: "I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (*Excursions*, 187). And here we see it is not only physical health but "spirits" too (and not "animal spirits") that Thoreau links to contact with the natural world untrammelled by the pressures and stress of human obligation.

Behind these remarks rests the larger idea that our bodies and minds have evolved with nature and are inextricably connected to it, that what we are and even what we think enjoy an intrinsic, connatural relation to the ecology of other modes of life. In more metaphysical terms, what we are and how we regard nature—our cognition and powers of conceptualization—are constitutive with, rather than merely regulative of, natural phenomena and natural laws. This may be identified as a “romantic” attitude, and it does echo themes and statements in writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, both of whom Thoreau read. Yet, this attitude attracted William James, too, and marks certain strains of modern environmental thought.

Two passages, again from Thoreau’s *Journal*, exemplify this value of the constitutive bond between human “health and spirits” and nature. One passage slants to the mental or even ideal:

By some fortunate coincidence of thought or circumstance I am attuned to the universe—I am fitted to hear—my being moves in a sphere of melody—my fancy and imagination are excited to an inconceivable degree—This is no longer the dull earth on which I stood—It is possible to live a grander life here—already the steed is stamping—the knights are prancing.

Here lurks deep awareness of a correspondence with the external world, of belonging, of a harmony of being so strong that it elevates thoughts, prompts creative power, and gives vision beyond mere eyesight, “melody” and music beyond mundane sound. “Already our thoughts bid a proud farewell to the so called actual life and its humble glories,” Thoreau continues. “Now this,” he concludes, “is the verdict of a soul in health. But the soul diseased says that its own vision and life a-lone is true & sane.”⁹

Yet, the ecstasy Thoreau describes has roots, or inspiration, directly in the things and productive systems of Earth. You cannot have senses to be out of unless you have senses to begin with. The two—ideal ecstasy and flesh-and-blood rhythms—are connected. They join as elements of one larger existence, as Thoreau outlines in this second passage, just a little earlier in his *Journal*:

What is called genius is the abundance of life or health so that whatever addresses the senses—as the flavor of these berries—or the lowing of that cow [a favorite sound for Thoreau]—which sounds as if it echoed along a cool *mt* side just before night—where odiferous dews perfume the air and there is everlasting vigor serenity—& expectation of perpetual untarnished morning—each sight & sound & scent & flavor—intoxicates with a healthy intoxication.

Taste, sound, smell, sight: all the senses but touch he directly invokes, yet touch virtually, too, for the passage has a palpable feel to it, what William Hazlitt calls “gusto.” Then, a few lines later, Thoreau reminds us that this

is not a circle of the senses only, but linked to something other than sense, a deeper perception, a more complex power, and rejuvenation, too:

If we have not dissipated the vital the divine fluids—then is there a circulation of vitality beyond our bodies. The cow is nothing—Heaven is not there—but in the condition of the hearer—I am thrilled to think that I owe a perception to the commonly gross sense of taste—that I have been inspired through the palate—that these berries have fed my brain. After I had been eating these simple—wholesome—ambrosial fruits—on this high hill side—I found my senses whetted—I was young again.

Thoreau then claims of the berries, “They fed my brain—my fancy & imagination—and whether I stood or sat I was not the same creature” (*Journal* 5, 215–16).

If we cast back over the two *Journal* passages just quoted, we realize how they run the scale from lowest sense to “a grander life,” and that they share one phrase *in common*: “my fancy and imagination” (“my fancy & imagination”) occurs crucially in both. These faculties—rather, this *one* faculty of imaginative power, for Thoreau does not seem here to distinguish them—provides the nexus for sense and spirit, for “bodies” and “brain.” This is, as Thoreau affirms, part of “what is called genius” and involves “the abundance of life or health”; it is “the verdict of a soul in health.”

This is a heady, encompassing reach, from small berries that metamorphose into “ambrosial fruits,” from “the lowing of that cow” that becomes heaven “in the condition of the hearer.” It is a self-affirming joy, positive and healthy. We realize it most, Thoreau contends, when we are in the direct presence of the natural world. In *Wild Fruits* he exclaims, “What a healthy out-of-door appetite it takes to relish the apple of life, the apple of the world, then!”¹⁰ One way to view this may be as an “uneasy tension between empiricism and idealism” or transcendentalism,¹¹ yet it is just such tensions that prove vital and sustaining for both material and mental wellness. And this requires a balancing act, too, for Thoreau regards health, physical and mental, as in many respects avoiding both excess and deprivation, where the secret of medicine is a habit of simplicity and deliberation, very hard to obtain and maintain—society all the time tempts us away from such a habit and seduces us with others—but all-important in its moderation.

BALANCE AND “MENTAL HEALTH”

So, Thoreau pronounces that “All places, all positions—all things in short are a medium happy or unhappy. Every Realm has its centre and the nearer to that the better while you are in it.” This immediately sparks another observation: “Even health is only the happiest of all mediums . . .

there may be excess or there may be deficiency—in either case there is disease. A man must only be *virtuous* enough." Thoreau even suggests that one may survive well enough physically without virtue ("Nature is very kind and liberal to all persons of vicious habits—and does not exhaust them with many excesses"), but then, of course, it is spiritual and mental health that suffer (*Journal 2*, 207, 42). In other words, as he points out in the chapter "Higher Laws" in *Walden*, there is a side of nature that is purely physical, "an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers." The key is to balance the two and not permit the lower nature to prevail. It is in that sense that he says, a few pages later in the same chapter, "If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable. Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome." This appears to contradict many other statements about health and nature until we realize that in this context "Nature" stands for that "animal in us," which "is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled." This distinction, he says, was prompted by seeing the "lower jaw of a hog, with white and sound teeth," apparently unlike the diseased teeth and gums of some virtuous people, and that jaw "suggested that there was an animal health and vigor distinct from the spiritual" (*Walden*, 219, 221, 219).

The larger point, again, is balance, the avoidance of excess. "Any excess," says Thoreau, even "to have drunk too much water even the day before is fatal to the morning's clarity" (*Journal 5*, 194). This is not only moderation in the physical or animal; it is likewise moderation and lack of fanaticism in the spiritual. It is, moreover, a finely practiced sense that the physical and spiritual depend on and inform one another, what today we might call a holistic sense of health.

What today we call mental health is part of Thoreau's picture, too. He uses the phrase "mental health" in the chapter "Solitude" (*Walden*, 136). Near the beginning of that book, in "Economy," he peers into our constant sense of stress and worry, worry over work, "all the day long on the alert," and our worry over change we cannot control. There is one illness that seems to admit little help and no final remedy: "The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well nigh incurable form of disease" (*Walden*, 11). One way to counter this is newly familiar to us as a byword found in various forms of therapy: live in the present, live in the moment. We are incapable of controlling everything that affects us, and thus so often we redouble our efforts to do so. For such an endless cycle of stress Thoreau has no easy cure, but he does state at least once what is needed for us to develop internally: "Health requires this relaxation this aimless life. This life in the present" (*Journal 5*, 392).

Moreover, if we merely sit and ruminate, if we remain forever indoors, our health will likewise suffer. Of shopkeepers and mechanics—and today we might think of office workers, employees who stare at screens for endless hours, and academics—who stay in their shops or

cubicles and cross their legs rather than walking on them, Thoreau muses, in "Walking," that "I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago" (*Excursions*, 187). In other words, a cramped imagination or a cramped body will each engender the other, and together they will eventuate in unhealthy desperation, a sense that life is stuck, meaningless.

Solitude and contact with nature may counteract this, but not carried to the point of isolation (again, balance enters in). In that chapter "Solitude," Thoreau paints the picture of a lost, starving man whose weakness produces a "diseased imagination." In contrast to him, "owing to bodily and mental health and strength, we may be continually cheered by a like but more normal and natural society"—more normal and natural than the ill man's "grotesque visions"—and so "come to know that we are never alone" (*Walden*, 136).

A symbol of this combined physical and mental health, and of living in the present, comes in *Walden* at the end of the previous chapter, "Sounds." That symbol is one of Thoreau's favorites, the "brave Chanticleer. He is more indigenous even than the natives," the native songbirds. "His health is ever good, his lungs are sound, his spirits never flag" (*Walden*, 127). The sound lungs are poignant, given the consumption that worked its way through Thoreau's family and ended his own life. Yet, as he says in one *Journal* entry, "I would brag like the chanticleer in the morning—with all the lustiness that the new day imparts—without thinking of the evening when I & all of us shall go to roost."¹² No matter how much the uncertainties of life and our lack of control over them plague and worry us, we are better off plunging in, storming the main gate, and fretting less over a future whose pitfalls we are imagining are, almost by definition, not the ones into which, often through no fault of our own, we fall.¹³ In short, as he remarks in "Solitude," there "can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still," that is, open and receptive (*Walden*, 131).

Sherman Paul has written eloquently about sound and particular sounds as fundamental to Thoreau's sense of health, and it would make little sense to repeat at length his fine argument here (see note 3, above). It is enough perhaps to say that there are countless instances in Thoreau's writing of sound as an index or messenger of health, sometimes with the implied pun of "sound" as healthy (Chanticleer's lungs that make such a lusty call are "sound"). It is a leitmotif in Thoreau that natural sounds often convey a sense of health or harmony, what Paul refers to as "the agency of correspondence," the means or harmony by which the bodily and animal integrate with the mental, spiritual, and moral. In "A Winter Walk," to cite just one example, Thoreau speaks of "feeling our pulse by listening to the low of cattle in the street, or the sound of the flail in distant barns." This heard, ever-present connection with nature, even when we live inside, provides a kind of aural thermometer. "No doubt,"

he continues, "a skilful physician could determine our health by observing how these simple and natural sounds affected us" (*Excursions*, 75).

ENCOUNTERING AND CONFRONTING, CHEER AND JOY

Left entirely to ourselves and to the habits of our own society—to our strictly town concerns without the aid and ministrations of direct contact with the natural world—we harbor a large, latent capacity for making ourselves sick, physically and mentally. The farther and longer the remove from direct contact with nature, the more difficult it becomes to treat those illnesses, which can become habitual. No amount of philosophizing, and least of all no long list of prescription medicines, can alter that; rather, walking and observing, and touching and seeing and smelling natural, vital life and its habitats counteract it. Without this natural diagnosis, without its healing, and without openness to this physician-like presence of the *natural constitution* of the world we will, as Anaximander feared, damage our own constitution and end by suffocating in our own waste. This, at least, becomes Thoreau's conviction, one that his own experience confirms to him.

Since we each experience this awareness of the natural constitution of the world individually, you will have your recounting, but here is one of mine:

On April 24, 2010, I was walking a powerline trail on the side of Penobscot Mountain in Pennsylvania, near Lake Nuangola, where, on its shore, my uncle and grandfather had built a cottage in the woods seventy years ago, and to which every year of my life I have repaired several times, at longer or shorter stretches, to restore myself. On that trail, over forty years, I'd seen fox and deer, tadpoles in two-month pools, bluebirds, turkey vultures, larks, hawks innumerable, and countless species of wildflowers and butterfly. That day I spotted only deer tracks and a solitary, large hawk, too high up for me to identify. It seemed that, at 1:00 p.m., actually nature's noon, the fauna, at least, were quiet or elsewhere. On retracing my steps, I began distractedly to think of this essay, and to imagine if I could acquire a decent edition of Thoreau on my electronic book reader in order to search his texts for several passages I recalled imperfectly (an acquisition that never happened). Along the trail I heard a rapid clicking to the left. I thought it first a dragonfly, for I'd already seen one, though it seemed early in the season. But the clicking increased suddenly in rhythm and loudness. It was, I then plainly saw, a rattle-snake, with rattles on its slightly elevated tail now in full vibration. My footsteps stopped about fifteen feet from its head. It was two or three feet off the trail before me. I hadn't halted more than a second or two before instinctively, yet slowly, taking a half step backward. In another few seconds the rattles ceased, and the snake—I could now fully see, about

three or four feet long—reversed its direction and moved with surprising speed into the underbrush, almost as fast as anyone could jog. Well, here I had been thinking of Thoreau and health and nature and his texts, and an encounter that could have been harmful, or even worse, seemed avoided only by the merest chance of timing. What kind of health was that?

Yet, the snake had stopped before I had. When I halted it was already still. Our paths were about to intersect, but it wanted no more of that direct meeting than I did. This snake warned me, and to its warning signal I was and remain deeply grateful. I finished the walk a healthier man than when I began it two hours earlier. For all that the snake knew, I carried a gun. (I have carried a rifle up there before, to target shoot with my son, and hunters are up there all the time in the fall.) The snake kept life and I kept limb. The warning of the rattles seemed to me only minutes after the encounter not unlike the early warnings we receive, often, of possible or impending ill health: stay this course, keep this up, do as you've been doing, and damage likely will occur, possibly serious damage. So, this warning, I concluded, was a *good* thing, not a signal of purposive harm—if the snake had moved to hunt me, surely it could have done so with real success—but an early-warning sign that, if heeded, would ensure the health of both of us. Now, that is a natural constitution pointing not to some Absolute but to a working out of living things. This became the passage to remember from that walk, one not easily forgotten.

That encounter, to revert to William James's criteria mentioned at the start of this essay, doesn't seem to me simply materialistic. It was living, vital. And in it, both the human and reptilian had choices to make, choices determined, in part, by evolution, but actual choices nevertheless. The agencies of a living world, therefore, seem not only different in degree but actually in kind from whatever agency inhabits a material world only; and from such a living world so naturally constituted we can expect different events, and those events require a choice of conduct. Reading those events and making those choices is a way to diagnose not only the material body but also the spirit that elects to live deliberately. It's at once a natural and transcendental way to health, something real that reflects on an ideal in mind.

You may already be recalling the last paragraphs of "Spring" in *Walden*, which begin, "Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe. . . . We can never have enough of Nature" (*Walden*, 317–318). We know what Thoreau means by *tonic* here, and it isn't the New England name for a carbonated beverage—he means medicine, health, healing, and something that gives vigor.

To drive home this natural medicine and the health it promotes, he thinks of the inevitable death that all living things face, but in a light unexpected: "We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding in the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast." He says it brings *cheer* (animates, brings joy, makes us clear headed). He goes on to a fact even harder to swallow: "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." The consciousness is not of nature red in tooth and claw but of a "Nature . . . so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another." He gives examples, even so much "that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood!" Then he offers a penetrating judgment: "With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped" (*Walden*, 318).

There's another pertinent section of *Walden*, in the earlier chapter "Solitude," in the last paragraphs that begin similarly: "The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever!" (*Walden*, 138). Again, *cheer*, used in a way that Wordsworth uses it in *The Prelude* ("cheer," "cheared," and "cheerful") to describe human interaction with nature, for example, "Thus long I lay / Cheared by the genial pillow of the earth / Beneath my head" (1805, I, ll. 87–89). Thoreau notes in his essay "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," setting up a contrast, "The poet is blithe and cheery ever, and as well as nature. Carlyle has not the simple Homeric health of Wordsworth" (*Early Essays*, 248). The sympathy that the presence of the natural world can afford us as human beings is so powerful that if we were to grieve for a just cause, then "the winds would sigh humanely," says Thoreau, "and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves." He asks, "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (*Walden*, 138). Here is a materialistic world more than materialistic—it's also intellectual, moral, and at times sympathetic.

This attitude John Muir echoes beautifully. I'm thinking especially of *My First Summer in the Sierra*, where many passages harmonize with Thoreau's: "What pains are taken to keep this wilderness in health,—showers of snow, showers of rain . . . floods of light . . . interaction of plant on plant, animal on animal, etc., beyond thought! How fine Nature's methods!" Muir asks why his enjoyment of Nature in the Sierra should appear extravagant. "It is only common sense, a sign of health, genuine, natural, all-awake health." The life Muir witnesses brings "cheer" and "joy." He

claims, "We soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe." Shortly after this observation Muir ventures: "More and more, in a place like this, we feel ourselves part of wild Nature, kind to everything," meaning akin to everything, though he seems also to pun.¹⁴ Muir himself sought personal health, mental and physical, in contact with nature.

The point here is not so much that Wordsworth's or Thoreau's *thought* is passed down, but rather that their quality of experience is in fact re-experienced in a completely different place and time, so that for a later soul similarly awakened, the natural world is not merely materialistic either, but vital. Speaking of fragile butterflies Muir remarks: "How are their little bodies, with muscles, nerves, organs, kept warm and jolly in such admirable exuberant health? Regarded only as mechanical inventions, how wonderful they are! Compared with these, Godlike man's greatest machines are as nothing."¹⁵

BODY AND SOUL, PHYSIC AND METAPHYSIC—AND HEAVEN

That was a digression. Returning to "Solitude" in *Walden*, Thoreau pushes the metaphor of health and medicine until it's no longer a metaphor but a symbol in the Coleridgean sense, it *is* itself even as it *also* represents a greater whole of which it is a part. "What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? Not my or thy great-grandfather's, but our great-grandmother Nature's universal, vegetable, botanic medicines, by which she has kept herself young always." Thoreau rejects the medicine bottle sold out of the traveling salesman's wagon and instead pleads, "let me have a draught of undiluted morning air. Morning air!" Then, to bring together this natural world, health, and a religious sense all in one he proclaims, "I am no worshipper of Hygeia, who was the daughter of that old herb-doctor Æsculapius," and commonly represented as the goddess of health; "but rather of Hebe, cupbearer to Jupiter, who was the daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the power of restoring gods and men to the vigor of youth" (*Walden*, 138–39). Here, as when he recorded in his *Journal*, "I was young again" (see above), is rejuvenation.

There's not time to explore the connection fully, but all this links up with Thoreau's interest in yoga, yogis, and his experiment in what we'd call transcendental meditation, an interest explored by Stefanie Syman in her book *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America* (2010). Thoreau's work also has clear affinities with certain modern mental health treatments, for example, Stephen S. Ilardi's *The Depression Cure: The 6-Step Program to Beat Depression Without Drugs* (2010), which emphasizes exercise, a healthy diet with more omega-3 fats, engagement rather than morbid rumination, sleep, and sunlight exposure—getting outside.

When the Environmental Protection Agency was founded and associated federal legislation passed in the early 1970s, that agency was foremost and largely linked to concerns of human health, the clean water, the clean air act, and similar statutes—though one might just as well have said that clean air and clean water would contribute, too, to the health of fish, birds, mammals, even of certain microbes. There's not enough space here to give it more than suggestive treatment, but Thoreau today alerts us to so-called environmentally linked or environmentally caused diseases, that is, diseases caused by our remove from nature, or our pollution of it (cancer, mental health, ADD?). President Obama received in May 2010 a report from the President's Cancer Panel, appointed by President Bush in the previous administration, stating that the extent of environmentally caused and aggravated cancers in the United States has been "grossly underestimated." On another medical front, as this essay was being prepared for the press in late summer 2011, a major, large-scale study of 192 pairs of identical and fraternal twins concluded that the causes of autism—a condition diagnosed with alarmingly increasing frequency—are more predominantly environmental than genetic. Exposure to certain medications and toxins may play a role.¹⁶

How, more exactly then, is Thoreau's interest as a physician *transcendental*? Let me approach that through Schelling's remark as Coleridge rephrases it in his *Biographia Literaria*, a remark, therefore, that Thoreau almost certainly read, the statement that any worthwhile transcendental idealism "is only so far idealism, as it is at the same time, and on that very account, the truest and most binding realism." If genuine, the two, in any ultimate analysis, cannot be viewed separately. Some transcendental philosophers, such as Fichte, could, in Coleridge's opinion, show "a boastful and hyperstoic hostility to Nature."¹⁷ However, for Schelling, for Coleridge, and for Thoreau, transcendental thought is legitimated only when rescued from an abstract play of concepts, words, and forms by the tangible, empirical world of living nature, of berries, slime moulds, and sunsets. And living nature is only known and experienced by us fully as human beings when we learn through self-conscious, inner examination, through a transcendental as well as an empirical reckoning.

In "'Another name for health': Thoreau and Modern Medicine," Michael P. Branch and Jessica Pierce contend that Thoreau has much to offer current medical practice. They acutely remark, "Thoreau argued that true health would result only from the integration of physic and metaphysics: 'Good for the body is the work of the body, and good for the soul is the work of the soul, and good for either the work of the other—let them not call hard names, nor know a divided interest.' . . . To Thoreau, the 'perfect body' was the expression of the combined physical and spiritual well-being that he identified with the natural world."¹⁸ The only true idealism and the only true realism must exist together: a transcendental physician, a swamp and meadow metaphysician.

Just as discussion continues about the degree of allegiance Thoreau gave to empirical science balanced against transcendental philosophy and religious experience, and whether the former, the empirical, came to dominate late in his life, so there is larger debate about the balance of these two elements in American Transcendentalism generally. I am here suggesting that over many years Thoreau recognized the interplay of the two, the *necessity* of their mutual existence as constituting both the only true realism and the only true idealism. They are not mutually exclusive. They are symbiotic. We feel on our pulse, we *experience* both. In his last years, Thoreau seems to have felt that scientific observation and discovery simply had more work left to do, and more open fields in nature to explore, than philosophy had in continuing to develop idealism or metaphysics. So, he set about to do the work most in need of doing.¹⁹

Finally, where might Thoreau experience in the natural world a kind of heaven, the image or actuality of a place of rest and restoration for the spirit? This he sees multiple times, and we might see it ourselves multiple times, too, but here is just one instance from his journal about Cape Cod. Fully aware of violence and death in nature, Thoreau nevertheless describes a heaven on Earth:

There is scarcely a white-pine on the forearm of the Cape. Yet in the northwest part of Eastham, near the Camp Ground, we saw, the next summer, some quite rural, and even sylvan retreats, for the Cape, where small rustling groves of oaks and locusts and whispering pines, on perfectly level ground, made a little paradise. The locusts, both transplanted and growing naturally about the houses there, appeared to flourish better than any other tree. There were thin belts of wood in Wellfleet and Truro, a mile or more from the Atlantic, but, for the most part, we could see the horizon through them, or, if extensive, the trees were not large. Both oaks and pines had often the same flat look with the apple-trees. Commonly, the oak woods twenty-five years old were a mere scraggy shrubbery nine or ten feet high, and we could frequently reach to their topmost leaf. Much that is called "woods" was about half as high as this—only patches of shrub-oak, bayberry, beach-plum, and wild roses, overrun with woodbine. When the roses were in bloom, these patches in the midst of the sand displayed such a profusion of blossoms, mingled with the aroma of the bayberry, that no Italian or other artificial rose-garden could equal them. They were perfectly Elysian, and realized my idea of an oasis in the desert. Huckleberry-bushes were very abundant, and the next summer they bore a remarkable quantity of that kind of gall called Huckleberry-apple, forming quite handsome though monstrous blossoms. But it must be added, that this shrubbery swarmed with wood-ticks, sometimes very troublesome parasites, and which it takes very horny fingers to crack. ("Across the Cape," chapter VII, *Cape Cod*, 101–102)

There is a heaven, and it is on Earth, an Elysium, a paradise with wood ticks and rattlesnakes. It's Eden, so we may learn to be better gardeners,

for heaven is under our daily care and cultivation, as is our health, from Penobscot Mountain even to the summit of Ktaadn.

In 1851, Thoreau wrote in his *Journal*, "Disease is not the accident of the individual nor even of the generation but of life itself. In some form & to some degree or other it is one of the permanent conditions of life."²⁰ He seemed to realize that the body always harbors some pathogen, it is only a question whether our defenses, what today we call the immune system, can gain control: "Life is a warfare a struggle" (*Journal* 4, 35). From December 1860 until he died May 6, 1862, tuberculosis sapped his strength. He traveled to Minnesota, a journey that took about two months, in part to seek relief. The climate there was then recommended for its dry, restorative power. Back in Concord in mid summer 1861, he spent time ordering his papers and writings, but lost weight, became weak, eventually had to stay indoors, and finally could barely sit up or speak. His sister Sophia, his friend Ellery Channing, and others such as Theo Brown remarked on his great equanimity, his buoyancy, his lack of complaint, his insistence that there was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, that it was as good to be sick as to be well.²¹ In the course of his unrelenting illness he was maintaining as much health as anyone could, for as long as he could, even until neither health nor disease remained.

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NOTES

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, 1911), 518.
2. James Russell Lowell, "Thoreau's Letters," *The North American Review* 101 (October 1865): 597-608; 604, 605, 607, 608. For the disagreement between Lowell and Thoreau, see Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 360-63.
3. Sherman Paul. "The Wise Silence: Sound as the Agency of Correspondence in Thoreau," *The New England Quarterly* 22.4 (1949): 511-27.
4. Michael P. Branch and Jessica Pierce, "'Another name for health': Thoreau and Modern Medicine," *Literature and Medicine* 15.1 (1996): 129-45; Antonio Casado Da Rocha, "The Value of Health in the Writings of Henry David Thoreau," *Environmental Values* 18 (2009): 201-15. I am thankful to Joshua G. Wilson for assistance in research and to Kevin Van Anglen and Jacob Risinger for helpful comments and suggestions.
5. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 119, 123, 157-59.
6. *Journal, Volume 7: 1853-1854*, ed. Nancy Craig Simmons and Ron Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16; *Journal, Volume 8: 1854*, ed. Sandra Harbert Petruionis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 229.
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11. Da Rocha, Antonio Casado. "The Value of Health in the Writings of Henry David Thoreau," *Environmental Values* 18 (2009): 202.

12. *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, ed. William Rossi and Heather K. Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 172.
13. For Chanticleer, contact with nature, and "living in the present," see also Da Rocha, 207–08.
14. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 170, 287, 14, 168, 325, 326.
15. *Ibid.*, 215.
16. Joachim Hallmayer, M.D. et al, "Genetic Heritability and Shared Environmental Factors Among Twin Pairs with Autism," *Archives of General Psychiatry* (2011): accessed September 12, 2011, doi: 10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.76.
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18. Michael P. Branch and Jessica Pierce, "'Another name for health': Thoreau and Modern Medicine," *Literature and Medicine* 15.1 (1996): 131.
19. For three of many possible examples, see Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Rochelle L. Johnson, *Passions for Nature: Nineteenth-Century America's Aesthetics of Alienation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 208–17, 266n46, 267n58; Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 169–73.
20. *Journal, Volume 4: 1851–1852*, ed. Leonard N. Neufeldt and Nancy Craig Simmons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 35.
21. See Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 385–89; Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 301–05.

THREE

Falling from Trees

Arborescent Prosody in John Clare's Tree Elegies

Erin Lafford and Emma Mason

This chapter brings together the experiences of reading and listening to think about the relationship between rhythm and well-being in John Clare's elegies on trees. We propose that the tree-like structure and rhythms of Clare's tree elegies forward a model of health and well-being that the poet uses to overcome feelings of grief and sickness provoked by the mass destruction of the environment and land caused by enclosure in the early nineteenth century. To foreground what we mean by tree-like or "arborescent" rhythms, we turn to Peter Broderick's thirty-minute sequence for piano and strings, *Music for Falling from Trees* (2009). Broderick, we argue, creates a rhythm of falling down as a prelude to being pulled back up into tonal, metrical, and emotional stability, a process that is apparent from the performed sound of the sequence as well as the visual elements of the score. We discuss Broderick's score to show how its arborescent content provides a map into health for the grieving or fallen listener and use this as a model for reading Clare's own poetic transcriptions of what he hears when he listens to and with trees. Both Broderick and Clare work from moments of sadness and despair: Broderick's sequence aurally produces the experience of a hospitalized mental patient undergoing a nightmarish drug therapy and electric shock treatment before finding a way to recovery through human compassion and attention; Clare painfully mourns the devastation of his rural neighborhood by declaiming the "cant" behind enclosure while engaged in an ultimately futile struggle to avoid his own hospitalization for mental ill-