

Death as Surprise in 18th and 19th Centuries Romanticism

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Abstract. One of the major themes of discussion in the art and especially the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries was the problem of death. In the beginning this seemed to be the case mostly because of the natural processes related to death as a transforming event of the human body and mind. However, towards the end of the 18th century and well into the 19th century, a certain shift took place from the common and normal perspective on death to a rather accessorized and scientific literary approach. Our attempt is to notice and make the necessary connections between the concepts of nature (both the human nature and the external-physical nature) and the innovative technologies recently implemented in the society of the time, with reference to the new accidental and commercial facets of death as destruction of nature especially in the work of the American Romantics R. W. Emerson and H. D. Thoreau. Aware that they are highly spoken of in view of their transcendentalism as a particular philosophy about the bond between man and nature, we will slowly come to terms with this type of concerns and connect them to the conflicting reality of the industrialization as a sudden and repressive phenomenon within the society of men. Finally our point is that precisely this phenomenon caused these writers to make a historical detour and use their naturalist formation in order to make sense of their century deaths and diseases.

Key words: death, nature, Romanticism, accident, science

Introduction

From a Romantic perspective, the signs of progress in the 18th century were perceived as unequivocal ways to destroy human personality and discard it from history. This perception is due to the fact that the attack which these mechanisms brought upon man was sudden and eclipsed the soul with the shadow of a violent and accidental death. Their cause is well portrayed in Nietzsche's aphorisms, for instance, where he staunchly resents a future vision developed by Martin Heidegger related to the relationship between man and the machine. On the other hand, the Romantic writers of the 19th century looked at the diseases of their time from a totally different angle, being aware that some of them were indeed new and of consumptive nature. As this was the case with tuberculosis, the Romantics would not speak of it as denigratory or regressive in a scientific manner, but thought of it as a means for spiritual and intellectual progress with a purgatory and reparatory purpose in the midst of the great industrial colossus. Thus the failure pertains to the machine which can sweep away the flesh, and not to the intellect or the soul, which in this case is always a step behind in matters of material productivity.

The differences between the 18th and 19th Romantic centuries view on the main death agents equals the difference between surprise and accommodation when a new element is introduced into a stolid atmosphere. It should be stressed, however, that the surprise is always the prerogative of the technique, while a repressive disease smoothly turns into habit. Though it is as old as the 18th century, sudden death has never had a solid logic as the slow death, and what modernity did was merely diversify the terminology considered void in an existentialist context. Moreover, in a Romantic work which stresses the man-nature bond as a psychological and physical relationship, nature is a projection of the self, which in its absence remains without an object. Nowadays, that would be the case of the cultural meaning of man's travel to space or man being void of nature as we know it: man's displacement is considered a type of death, a divorce from nature in a more than symbolical sense.

What is surprisingly connected with death and its definition in Romantic literature and philosophy is the accidental, a term perceived as being commercial just like the causes of death: the windmill, the pit or coal mine, the first usage of vaccination in the 18th century, new inventions and the 19th century industrialization, or more recently the atomic bomb and space craft. In the same time, the rituals associated with accidental deaths are from the very start commercial, and this truth is universally accepted (mourning is rapid and conscious, and its reward implies more materiality than humanity, an idea which can be found both at the beginnings and at the end of the Romantic fiction and non-fiction works.

For our purpose here, we will consider mainly the non-fiction work in a particular setting of the Romantic school, namely the American Romantics of the 19th century whose work was strongly influenced by death in both its personal and technical terms. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were surrounded by consumption (tuberculosis) all their life not only in their enlarged families, but wherever they went, and death itself was the main reason why they even

travelled to see other parts of the world and other cultures, to become Romantics. This experience of death Emerson¹ and Thoreau² came to acknowledge as a century old in their literature and they are among only a few Romantic writers who would associate it with the need for natural purity in the form of transcendentalism and as utopia of the soul in a deadly body. But consumption was not the foremost accidental disease of their time as reflected by their journals and memorialist work: so were the pitfalls, windmills, coach travels on poor roads, horse riding, deep waters and suicide at the pressure of industrialization. Our aim here is to call for consumption as becoming a kind of personal and communitarian disease which brought a graceful and slow withering, while on the other hand the accidental deaths mentioned trapped the body and instantly eliminated the mind, allowing Romantics no time to adjust and temper their enthusiasm.

Though the personal thoughts of these Romantic writers (they separated these diseases and deaths into different classes), we do not have to take their very word for it or suspect that their non-fiction work is subjective in all respect. One of the reasons why we chose to present aspects of deaths in these author's oeuvre was precisely the existence of factual documentation preoccupied with their lives and the historic details which illustrate a common fear of the accident both in Emerson and Thoreau, and in their contemporaries' mind.

Emerson and the natural. When death defies nature

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) stands amid the Romantics of his generation as a pioneer of a new type of taste for nature. In his essay *Nature*,³ Emerson challenges all lovers of nature to take a stand and review their relationship with the external elements individually. In this attempt, he believes, one must be able to tell nature's prerogatives from man's intrepid actions which can cause the world irreparable damage. Emerson gets to describe nature as a powerful force that transforms not only its own state and climate, but man's state too, in that it surprises him with views and feelings which determine sensorial modulation in man's mind and soul:

Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear how glad I am.⁴

When Emerson says that nature "fits" both a benevolent and a negative state of mind, he rather exempts man from having anything to impede nature with or from being nature's commander. Unlike his fellow European or British Romantic writers, Emerson seems to walk in the footsteps of mild pre-Romantics and Classics when he describes this special type of liaison between what is of nature and what belongs to man. He does not imply that man should overcome the powers of nature or that he could masterfully force his own feelings and will on nature. Neither of these realms seem to prevail on each other, since nature only "fits" a man's state, while man only enjoys whatever nature brings along. There is, however, a special spot in which nature is believed to work its magic on man in the sense that nature changes man's state of mind and revives his body and soul:

In the woods, a man casts off his years and... is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed... In the woods, we

1 "The first known case in the Emerson family was that of reverend William Emerson, Ralph Waldo's father, who had the disease when he died in 1811 at the age of 42..., all [his children] has symptoms of tuberculosis. Both Edward and Charles died of it in their late twenties [also the case of Waldo's first wife Ellen Tucker, who died at 19]. Waldo appeared to have symptoms of the disease at various times in his life, once writing of having a *mouse gnawing at his chest*, but died of an unrelated illness at age 79." See Constance Manoli-Skocay, "A Gentle Death: Tuberculosis in 19th Century Concord." *The Concord Magazine* (Winter 2003).

2 "Henry David Thoreau succumbed to tuberculosis at age of 44... His grandfather had died of it in 1801, and when Henry father's died in 1859 his symptoms were consistent with tuberculosis. His brother John was living with it,... ad their sister Helen became a victim in 1849 at age thirty-six." Constance Manoli-Skocay, "A Gentle Death: Tuberculosis in 19th Century Concord." *The Concord Magazine* (Winter 2003).

3 Biographical and bibliographical data on R. W. Emerson, in Andrew Ballanthyne, *Architecture theory: a reader in philosophy and culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 30. For a detailed biography, see Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson. The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1834), 12.

return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity, which nature cannot repair.⁵

Moreover, in the woods, “the name of the nearest friend sounds foreign and accidental.”⁶ Faithful to its theory that nature and man are individually part of the transcendental being of God, and that God is not himself a unity, but an oikonomy (he is not merely one, but many in multiple manifestations), Emerson first rebels against his religious heritage as a unitarian Christian, and then plunges into the deep waters of natural theism also known from Antiquity and the Classics as polytheism or divine substance spread in each of nature's particular elements. He begins to sound more and more classical as he makes further comments on the necessity that man be moral as nature's actions are virtuous and thus beautiful.

On these grounds, Emerson states, all heroic individual actions manifest virtue because they maintain universal balance, and since the universe is all we can find deep inside ourselves, nothing we do should harm the universe, otherwise it is suicidal. Emerson's idea is that heroic (human) action is not to be understood as an act of bravery, but as an act of makings good and meaningful sense of our innocence. Everything contrary to this strife for purity is contrary to nature, to human nature, and thus to reason and faith. This uncommon thinking for a Romantic writer is due to Emerson's transcendentalism which gives us a close up into his life and work unevenly molded in comparison with his fellow Romantic writers of the age, whose aim was to cause exceptions and not to attain the state of personal inner and external progress in good terms with the universe around us. While not so inclined to technical details as Henry David Thoreau in observing nature, Emerson is nevertheless prone to gathering physical data which help him understand nature in its raw form, that is the rawest (purest) the better. This does not affect though the meaningful purpose (reason) of what is natural, from whence we can only assume that by definition everything unnatural lacks proper reason and equilibrium. Even the loss of his brothers, his first wife and his first born he thought of as natural, because their fading away was gracious, slow, communitarian, and maybe reminded him how everything under the sun is eventually fading away. Nevertheless, his Romantic spirit reacted in shock when in one special situation the unnatural happened and suddenly took away a friend in the most “tragic” of ways:

The death of Margaret Fuller when she was only forty was a shock to Emerson... Somehow, Margaret's death caught him unprepared and undefended. Her loss drove him in on himself and made him intensely conscious of a side of life he usually tended to rush over. It is easier to call this conscience a sense of tragedy,... rather a sense that something was fundamentally wrong with the universe, an awareness of some elemental lack at the core of things...⁷

A journalist, editor, and transcendentalist herself at the age of forty, Margaret Fuller sure outlived other cultivated and notable women of her time who died from consumption, for instance. But why was her death only a matter of tragedy for Emerson? Why did he perceive its circumstances as being unnatural and shocking? For a start, it was probably because her death in 1850 was caused by a shift in the natural order, by something which should never happen to man. And indeed it was something bigger than one death, an event which foreshadowed the sink of Titanic, the supreme naval incident that for several years changed the face of the world. But the shipwreck in which Margaret died was so far from natural that people afterwards had to find a logic in building lighthouses before, not after, they built impressively large ships. The tragism⁸ of Margaret's death cannot be fully grasped according to the then Romantic American philosophy without examining the second personality besides Emerson who helped shape transcendentalism by moving it from “Nature” to the woods.

Thoreau and the individual. When death defies the universe

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), a Harvard fellow himself, lived the life of a Romantic both in terms of his expenditures

5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1834), 12, 13.

6 *Ibid.*, 13.

7 Robert D. Richardson, *Emerson. The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 486.

8 See comments about this in Abigail Rorer and Bradley P. Dean, eds., *Of Woodland Pools, Spring-Holes and Ditches: Excerpts from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 4.

which exceeded his income, and in terms of his confrontation with sickness and death.⁹ Reading Emerson's *Nature* as early as 1837, he was also passionate about Goethe and the Latin classics like Virgil, an interest which drove him to scientifically explore the natives of North America and their virgin land.¹⁰ He was equally concerned, as Emerson for instance, with the innocence of heart and mind, which is one of the reasons why he wrote *Walden*¹¹, and why he did it in the woods. But in Thoreau the soul does not enter its well-being state until its need for morality and "right" is secured and protected by civil government. However, for what is worth Thoreau himself felt that he was compelled to retrieve into the woods in order to write and, as he says, "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."¹² Thoreau's literature cannot be fully grasped without his philosophical system¹³ and his naturalist thinking, which just like Emerson's is imbued with a utopian vision of man and nature. In Thoreau, it seems, the result of new experiments and industrial inventions is paramount and has the magnitude of natural disasters or calamities, and they both match the reaction that a Romantic writer is capable of in times of distress.¹⁴ However, he behaves like a classic when he uses his skills to observe the inner life of nature in the same habitat where purity and beauty are to be found, namely the woods.¹⁵ The relationship between sentiment and contemplation in Thoreau's *Walden* and in his *Journal* is particularly important here, since it shows that he thinks as a classicist whose feelings spread from the observation of natural complexity and form. In other words, this binary relationship is what was called "Thoreau's juxtaposition of his metaphysical musing with the scientific knowledge that triggered the excitement."¹⁶ And what triggered the excitement was the form, which ultimately drives man to reassess his bond with nature: "How was it when the youth first discovered fishes?... [What interested] mankind in the fish, the inhabitant of the water?... A faint recognition of a living contemporary, a provoking mystery."¹⁷ The conscious nature of this bond with nature comes through observation/contemplation only, because the mystery/divine is peculiar to all natural things. Consequently, Thoreau's transcendentalism comprises not only natural, brute elements, but also areas where civilization has been installed and became traditional for our civil society. His naturalist taste is nevertheless obstructed by the civil order, in which Thoreau cannot find the natural order that the universe displays, hence his mistrust of ranks of power and human standards that are in breach with natural laws. Thus, in the essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," sometimes placed as an appendix of *Walden*, Thoreau extensively comments on the peculiarities of the then American government, which has not the vitality and force of a single living man..., it is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this...; for the people must have some complicated machinery... to satisfy that idea of government which they have.¹⁸

Thoreau's idea of naturality then does not apply to the state, and his transcendentalism is not a concept that would embrace all spaces though. Since man cannot enact his free and moral order into a social law, Thoreau shows, and since all law is a product of state technicalities, man as an individual must oppose whatever "does not keep the country free and... does not educate."¹⁹ As a Romantic writer, Thoreau stands in awe at what "the people" (men) come to enforce as

9 Short and comprising information about H. D. Thoreau's life and career, in Andrew Ballanthyne, *Architecture theory: a reader in philosophy and culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 150. For a detailed biography, see Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: a life of the mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

10 Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: a life of the mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 1-15.

11 An association of terms can be made here from *Walden*, the surrounding place of Concord, Thoreau's home, to the German "Wald," a word meaning woodland, of the woods.

12 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Harper, 1950), 118.

13 Concerning the transcendental philosophical system in both Thoreau and Emerson, see Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

14 Jack Turner, ed., in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2009), quotes at note 4 from Leonard N. Neufeld, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau and Enterprise*, 1989, explains this seemingly equivocal relationship of a then Romantic writer with reality: "Thoreau is awake and alert; his neighbors are stagnant, asleep, little better than dead... One of his most common accusations is that ordinary men are dead in life, or they might as well be dead, or they are incapable of dying because they have not lived. Thoreau's romantic "half in love" with death deserves study." See page 34, note 4.

15 In this respect, Thoreau is a follower of Goethe, who in a nutshell used to say that "we are pantheists by searching nature, polytheists as poets, and ethically monotheists." See Goethe, in Jean Livescu, *Preface to Goethe's Opere (Works)*, vol. 1 (Bucuresti: Univers, 1984).

16 See Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001) 145.

17 H. D. Thoreau, *Journal* (November 30, 1858): 11, 360.

18 Henry David Thoreau, in Waldo R. Browne, ed., *Man or the State?* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919), chapter IV: Henry David Thoreau, "On the Duty of Civil Government," 70, 71.

19 *Ibid.*, 71.

right and wrong and worthy of respect, which is in sharp contrast with the conscience that the individual (man) uses to decide on civil matters. Disobeying the civil order regards extensively the law of men and the intricate and foremost corrupt structure of their government, but also what the law of modern men praises as innovative and bountiful. In this respect, Emerson and Thoreau have their own special place within American Romanticism as they come from Concord, Massachusetts, an expanding commercial route and a promising industrial hub in their time. Emerson and Thoreau sure had much to see and in part repel in the dawn of this modern era, many things and facts of life which to a natural mind seemed disruptive. Every day the two writers would witness the forceful power of industrialization on their once beautiful town, and also people being proud of their achievement:

A lead pipe manufactory was set up in 1819, a shoe factory was built in 1821..., a group of entrepreneurs had set up the Milldam company in 1821, developing thereby a new commercial district in the center of town,... and the town was also a center for the manufacture of pencils, clocks, hats, bellows, guns, bricks, barrels, and soap... Wagons rumbled through town continually on roads that were both dusty and noisy. Concord was a busy transport hub and its numerous taverns were full of teamsters. It had six warehouses, a bindery, two saw mills, two grist mills, and a large five-story cotton mill...²⁰

Thoreau's retreat in the woods for two years before commencing any civil or educational duties and at the peak of the industrial development of his homeland was an act of conscience directed towards his fellow citizens, as well as an act of self-instruction and observation. However, a devoted Romantic spirit would not go on a retreat for too long: he is an effervescent spirit. He would rather re-enter society with new ideas and new brute forces so as to overturn and invalidate the existing order. However, the fact that Thoreau does not advocate for a new government to replace the actual ruling, but for a better one instead, says a lot about his intentions as a citizen: he does not wish to abolish the present government, but to improve and educate it, which is as classical a method as it can be. Thoreau and Emerson alike were not the type of Romantics that would constantly complain about any kinds of inconveniences including their own fate and misunderstood genius, and they were mindful of the beneficial nature of progress.²¹ They were men of their time and did not oppose development, but given their family and friends dreadful history with consumption, they were also men of prudence aware that their contemporaries could not fight death and disease with more machines and money, or not just yet. For them it was the machine that imposed on people and increased the unknown of the natural order by expanding man's territory, and thus by exposing him to further perils and diseases. For both Thoreau and Emerson, this exploration of the unknown creates an uneven relationship between social and moral, between industry and art, since the machines valued man's physical powers only, leaving his soul behind. The machine (industrialization) works with machines void of sentiments.

A conclusion on the unknown death

Thoreau's and Emerson's fear of the unknown is likely triggered not necessarily by universal forces, cataclysms and furies: this kind of unknown has an observable source, which is the magnificence of nature and its raw material. These Romantics' fear is located deeply within the human habitat and was caused by people's search for rapid progress and transgression of nature and inner self. The unknown which brings fear is not of the elements. They welcome the elements because they bring them the joy of research and discovery, the return to essence. Of course that, for instance, water is an elements of which man manifests fear, but he that will not adventure into deep waters, but instead will respect and cherish the life embedded in them. This means that in our large universe (cosmos) another universe (microcosm) exists and from the latter life itself springs:

In one of his last works, *The Dispersion of Seeds...* [Thoreau] recounts having "leveled for an artificial pond at our new cemetery, Sleepy Hollow". The pond was finally completed in 1859, and the following year

20 Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: a life of the mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

21 Emerson and Thoreau were loved by their fellow citizens and respected for their education, talent, and stamina manifested in spite of hardship of life and a tradition with consumption. They even had the conduct of a respected fellow Concordian, as Emerson was read by every cultivated American and gathered lots of cultivated men in his philosophy circle at the Emerson home, while Thoreau gave lectures which for all audiences and thus considerably maximized his incomes. For details, see Edward Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in Concord. A Memoir Written for the Social Circle in Concord Massachusetts* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004). See also Bradley P. Dean and Ronald Wesley Hoag, "Thoreau's Lectures After Walden: An Annotated Calendar," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1996): 241-362. For the eulogy and pompous burial ceremony with which the people of Concord honored Emerson, see "Concord's Irreparable Loss! The Death and Funeral of Ralph Waldo Emerson," in *Concord Freeman* (May 4, 1882).

sported "several small patches of the large yellow and kalmiana lily," a fact which led him to remark, "Thus, even in the midst of death, we are in life." Thoreau loved to see that Nature was rife with life, and nowhere is the life of Nature so rife as in vernal pools. But he also insisted that the "universe is wider than our views of it"... The nature of vernal pools masterfully celebrate not just life, but the larger universe in which we live. In fact, his woodland pools, spring-holes, and ditches are microcosms of that... universe in which energies are constantly transmuted one into another.²²

The same image captured in the presence of the pond (see Walden pond) or at Sleepy Hollow, where life is created at the surface of waters as a microcosm is encountered under the water, and we already learned about Thoreau's passion for ichthyology in that he considers the fish as "another image of God."²³ Thus either naturally created or handmade, ponds, ditches, and pools which are water recipients are not perceived as agents of death, at least not of unwilling death. Yes, deep waters are to be feared, however murders at that time were deemed as exceptional "acts of God," though the voluntary action of suicide was considered common even in the most uncommon places.²⁴

The innovative nature of medicine, commerce, manufacture, transportation, food and mine industry, and leisure were particularly exponential as causes of death in both 18th and 19th centuries. They were the real unknown and unnatural factors which caused bereavement and uncertainty both physically and mentally, in spite of the progress they promised especially in the 19th century. They were feared more than cancer and heart failure both because they were everywhere in the news and they implied a foreign object that brought death instantly rather than slowly. Be it the inoculation formula against new infectious diseases such as smallpox²⁵, which required many testing on real people, or the new windmills, coal pits, wagons or carts traveling with increasing speed, accidents at work, shipwreck or simply a horseback ride commonly practiced at the time for leisure but with no proper harness classes and skill, they were all perceived as unreliable, surprising, and sudden ways to produce death and suffering.

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22 See Abigail Rorer and Bradley P. Dean, eds., *Of Woodland Pools, Spring-Holes and Ditches: Excerpts from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 3, 4.

23 Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 145.

24 See Tony Lonton, "Vaccination, Windmills, and Other Causes of Death in 18th Century Whitkirk," *Barwicker* 92 (Dec. 2008). In the 19th century, suicide was usually associated with the increasing "pressure of industrialization." For the then multiple ways to dye, see Lewis R. Aiken, *Dying, death, and bereavement*, fourth edition (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2009).

25 Tony Lonton mentions this as having been practiced in England as early as 1722, for instance, before a proper vaccination was even approved of in 1796. See Lonton, "Vaccination, Windmills, and Other Causes of Death in 18th Century Whitkirk," *Barwicker* 92 (Dec. 2008).