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Ralph Waldo Emerson as Nature Poet

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Abstract:
Since nature inherently contains moral truth, knowledge and wisdom, the artist should rely on it, rather than convention, in shaping, formulating and appraising his work. Emerson maintains that literary works should not be only be evaluated according to artificial standards of tradition, but should rather be judged by nature since art is based organically on it. He shares with Coleridge the belief that literary forms should innately stem from nature instead of following mechanical laws of decorum. Emerson affirms that if we succeed in having a direct relation with the "basic forces" of nature, by retreating to a primitive, simple life, we will be able to reinvent genuine, organic forms (Matthiessen 133-6). In "Nature", Emerson further argues that nature provides us with language as well as with an explanation of the use of language. Every word in language is a symbol of a natural fact; for example, "right" is a sign for "straight" while "wrong" means "twisted". Similarly, we borrow the word "heart" to express emotion and the word "head" as analogous to thought. Both the abstract and the concrete find their roots in the visible forms of nature. Moreover, every natural fact corresponds to some spiritual fact. We symbolically use "light" and "darkness" to express knowledge and ignorance.

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Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) holds a unique and secure place in American culture as the first public intellectual in the history of the United States, founder of American Transcendentalism and the prime figure of American Romanticism. The scope of his work and achievement is difficult to encompass since he made a profound contribution to literature, philosophy, religion, social reform and thought.

The significance of his place in American thought and letters is primarily due to his persistent, direct and indirect influence on his own contemporaries and successors, as well as his own substantial published works.

Emerson proposes that at an early stage in life, man was spontaneously united with nature, speaking a true and poetic language; and in the course of time, he loses this connection with divine truth, but if he reconnects himself again to nature, he can restore his primary innocent state (Morse -8).

Holding nature in such a holy status reflects Emerson's Romantic preoccupations and premises; he views nature as sacred and fully capable of teaching and preaching human beings, as he states in "Nature" (1836):

All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun,—it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields. (*SE* 59)

Addressing nature in this light relates Emerson to Wordsworth, whose view of nature formed a "radical theology" for the anxious American minister (Pace, "Lifted to Genius?").

Perry Miller in his attempt to define the American transcendentalists states that:
Emerson attempts to practice his organicist thought in most of his writings:
Emerson believed in organic unity. The universe is One, it is vitally informed with Spirit and vitally interrelated, and all parts of it are faithful representatives of the whole, if they are properly viewed. The All is in Each, and Emerson's writing continually strives to embody this revelation in words of power. (Fogle 6)

In his poem "Each and All" (1839), Emerson attempts to examine this complex pattern of organic relations controlling the whole universe through a series of parallels and analogies. The poem begins with the situation of an observer who is looking across a landscape displaying these apparently irrelevant objects: the "red-cloaked clown", "the heifer, that lows in the upland farm", and the "sexton tolling the bell at noon". Such observations on nature bring the observer to this moral value:

> All are needed by each one;
> Nothing is fair or good alone. (*CW* 4)

The key to understanding Emerson's philosophical argument in "Each and All" is to be found in his own prose writings. In "Nature" (1836), Emerson proposes the idea of "the totality of nature" in reference to the perception of unity as an essential condition to the perception of beauty: "Nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole" (*SE* 47). The poetic speaker is fascinated with the heavenly

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sound of a sparrow singing at dawn, so he takes it home. However, the bird's song loses all its charm when it is taken out of its natural context; without the sight of the river and the sky the sparrow's song is not pleasing at all. Equally, when the speaker brings the "delicate shells" from the shore to his house, their beauty disappears, as if left behind with "the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar." Emerson further enhances his argument with the story of the lover who is enchanted with "his graceful maid/ As 'mid the virgin train she strayed", but when she becomes his wife, the "gay enchantment [is] undone" and he cannot see her beauty at all. Therefore, the poetic persona seems to lose his faith in beauty and he screams: "I covet Truth". At this moment of despair, nature inspires him with the "Truth" he is seeking:

As I spoke, beneath my feet
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club-moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine cones and acorns lay on the ground;
Above me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and deity:
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole. (*CW* 5-6)

The viewer now realizes that beauty is the outcome of the organic relations connecting all natural objects to each other, and that each of these natural objects alone is not fair enough. Within every natural landscape each object appeals to one sense such as sight or hearing, and the feeling of beauty comes with the way these objects work on all our senses simultaneously. That is how the speaker regains his faith in beauty, allows himself to be overcome by "the perfect whole," and equally realizes himself as part of the higher unity. David Porter argues that the way in which Emerson builds "Each and All" gives deeper insight into his habit of constructing his poems following the pattern of exploiting the particulars in order to reach "a philosophical revelation". The seemingly irrelevant forest scenes develop gradually towards a meaningful conclusion; the meditations of Emerson's poetic personae undistractedly unfold his own moral concern (18):

In "Each and All," it is the speaker of simple talent or fancy who "aggregates" experiences, collecting a sparrow and seashells without discerning the plan of "the perfect whole" from which they are organically inseparable. Here again, the speaker starts out misled into thinking he can possess things as he pleases; he soon discovers that removed from their place in the great circuit, they become, like the shells, "poor, unsightly, noisome things." Through a slow, deliberate version of the eyeball experience, the speaker's consciousness finally rises so that he "sees" the larger beauty. (Porter 79)

The poem portrays the scene of a snowstorm that veils all nature and shuts everyone indoors in "a tumultuous privacy of storm". The images used to depict this scene show nature to be "so savage" as well as "So fanciful". Despite the apparent cruelty of the snowstorm that heavily covers everything and makes life almost stop, the "wild work" of nature creates wonderful forms of beauty that a human mason can never compete with:

On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer's lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer's sighs, and the gate
A tapering turret overtops the work.

The "fierce artificer" brings his material from "an unseen quarry", and playfully and quickly creates his own awesome architecture without caring for "number or proportion". When the sun shines, people are left astonished as they attempt to "mimic in slow structures, stone by stone/ Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work, / The frolic architecture of the snow". Nature creates in a spontaneous, savage way and the result is beautiful and astonishing.

The poem's dramatic structure, once again, carries from confusion to clarity, converting experience into statement, moving from dim and clogged activity into the sun, and setting there a sculptured monument to natural revelation. (Porter 37)

The way in which Emerson tackles nature in almost every piece of his writing reflects a special concern and adherence to it. For Emerson nature is the central determining force in man's life; it "is the law, the final word, the supreme court... [and his] basic teaching is that the fundamental context of our lives is nature" (Richardson 97). Robert D. Richardson in his "Emerson and Nature" examines such a relationship while emphasizing its dynamic aspect, in the sense that the meaning of nature for Emerson is to be found in the way in which we immediately experience it.

Nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things-how things are; it was a guide to life, a foundation of philosophy, art, language, education, and everyday living. "Nature is what you may do." It was the green world of gardens and parks, and the wild world of the sea and the woods. Above all, and running through all his thought on the subject, nature was for Emerson the experience of nature. Some of the most often-cited passages in Emerson's writings are accounts of immediate physical experience…

Clearly, Emerson embraces nature in every sense; he is not

only concerned with it in ideological terms, but also engaged with the actual experience of observing and studying the natural world. Richardson brings ample biographical evidence that clarifies Emerson's attachment to the natural world:

As a boy, Emerson rambled in the woods and fields outside Boston. As a young man, he thought for a while of becoming a naturalist. As a father, he took his children on nature walks and taught them all the flowers and birds and trees. All his life his interest in nature was rooted in his delight [in] and close observation of nature. (Richardson 97)

Emerson's ideas of the relation of nature to the self delivered Americans into the custody of America. Instead of regarding their identity as a historically determined consciousness that must impose itself upon the mindless matter of the wild, they were encouraged to see that their land was another expression of the soul centered in themselves, that it beckoned to them to realize their true relation with it. American history could be the history of nature's reassuming alienated man to itself rather than the history of man's warfare with it. (Ziff 19)

Larzer Ziff argues that Emerson holds the typical Romantic idea that there was a time when man lived instinctively in nature as "an inseparable part of it." Then, as he grows and gains experience he becomes more immersed in matter, his soul forgets about reality, and he gets alienated from nature. With the retreat to nature searching for its laws, man seeks "partial reunion" with it, but he realizes how far he is now separated from nature (17). Emerson's Romantic premises bring him to the conclusion that American culture is deeply rooted in nature. The superficiality of American history is compensated for with the power provided by American landscape. Ziff further argues that Emerson's rejection of the individual's "consistency" is equally applied to the concept of history as a series of past events: "history is a lived present rather than a shaping past. It is not a chronology but an instantly available cosmos" (2). The dynamic flux of the process of communion with nature is the primal source for such a view of history as a "lived present."

Moreover, in "Nature", Emerson outlines a theory of aesthetics grounded in nature. Nature provides man with an essential need for his life, which is beauty; every natural object has the ability to give man delight and pleasure. The perception of beauty depends on the interaction of the human eye, light, and natural landscape (SE 42). This is the "perfect whole" which appeals to our senses, as Emerson claims in his poem "Each and All":

All are needed by each one,
Nothing is fair or good alone.

Likewise, Emerson dwells on the Romantic view of nature as the best teacher for man as he declares in his early essay "The American Scholar" (1837). He calls for a disregard of traditional forms and embrace of nature for the sake of creativity and originality:

Not out of those on whom systems of education have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the new, but out of the unhandselled savage nature; out of terrible Druids and Berserkers come at last Alfred and Shakespeare. (SE 94-5)

Conclusion

Obviously, Emerson believes in a link between the language we use and physical nature (SE 48-9).

According to him nature provides man with an essential need for his life, which is beauty; every natural object has the ability to give man delight and pleasure. The perception of beauty depends on the interaction of the human eye, light, and natural landscape

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