

Romantics and Their Delusions: A Waste of Time or Worthwhile?

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Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson inspired generations of Americans to take the here and now of their particular New World lives as the occasion to claim and rejuvenate their European cultural inheritance. Adapting a Wordsworthian Romanticism to the broader horizons of North America, and to the explicitly democratic thinking of the new republic, Emerson demonstrated how a host of "self-reliant" individuals could add up to a new kind of society. Nature is the authority to which every person, potentially, can appeal for insight, and a collective founded on Nature had to be something new and true. Could things go astray? Indeed. And Emerson painfully noted all the ways in which one's faculties are not up to the task. But he retained his fundamental faith that revelation means looking at the world with fresh eyes.

-Dr. Bruce Greenfield

Where Wordsworth and Coleridge are simple votaries in the cult of nature, Emerson is the elect priest, versed in the mysteries of the church and invested by the divine. Leading his blind initiates into a world of seeing, Emerson shows his devotees a picture of paradise wherein nature reveals herself unto man wholly and without condition, if but for a fleeting moment. But Emerson's faith is one fraught with contradiction. Born to a Unitarian minister, Emerson's problem is ironically one of a divinity divided. Can the discursiveness of man and the unity of nature ever be reconciled? Can individual experience, given its subjective nature, ever have collective meaning? Emerson answers in the affirmative, offering a sort of holy trinity as his solution in "The American Scholar," "Nature," and "Experience." In these three texts, he argues that man in his multiplicity and ever-changing temperament finds in the eternal vicissitudes of nature a companionate spirit that completes his half-soul.

Emerson writes in parables, preaching a gospel half-Gnostic and half-nonsense, but his romantic ideologies, while slippery at first, take firm root by essay's end. He chooses his audience carefully, so that in "The American Scholar," he appeals not to those diseased artists, long perverted in their obsessive slavishness to an inherited world of words and pictures, but to a new generation free from taint. The young collegiate, naïve and ignorant, may feel at a general disadvantage, but it is the sage elders who are gross in their ways. Emerson seeks to preserve the collegiate's unspoiled, child-like availability before it is too late, remarking, "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other [, he] who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."¹ Emerson sits at the forge, hammering out the American canon and testing the mettle of his literary disciples. There are but two choices: embrace what he describes as the cold darkness of the setting sun (a dig at the

declining English empire?) or move forward into the American frontier, chasing the ever-distant horizon.

Emerson's compatriots are hardly dream-chasers; they waste their time lounging about in the evening shade. But soon their genius will be totally eclipsed:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?²

The Americas are a stagnant marshland fit for nothing but malaria and mosquitoes. The placid waters reflect back an ugly picture of the past, one in which rehashed genius appears in grotesque, regurgitated forms. Stricken with paralysis and plagued by inaction, the American scholar is still beholden to a foreign master across the sea. Will these Harvard men unshackle themselves from the hegemonic sway of the English literary canon and its Continental counterparts, or are their minds already entrenched in a world of decadent language made corrupt? Like the prodigal son, the schoolboy is ever greedy, but his misspent youth leaves him devoid of soul. Instead of wasting his purse, he wastes his life and makes off far worse than a swineherd. He is a mortician tending to the bloated corpses and corpuses of dead authors; better yet, he is a maggot feeding on the genius of others. Having gone far astray, the scholar has substituted the chirping bird for the pedagogy of the professor. This parasite is far removed from the harmonized symbiosis of man and nature he once endeavored upon:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature [...] The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find,—so entire, so boundless.³

Fully engaged by the world around him, the artful student is confined to a claustrophobic sphere of Shakespeare and Cicero. Is man then an agent of his own destiny or simply a caretaker for the long-since departed, indenturing himself to the Western tradition? Emerson still has a glimmer of hope:

The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this

action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favourite, but the sound estate of every man.⁴

Here, the active soul seems a flight of fancy, something that elevates one man above another without rhyme or reason. At the same time, Emerson argues that the peasant farmer has every bit as much access to the natural world as the philosopher. Having escaped the dead poet's society, the scholar finds himself, as any other, alone in the wide world of nature. The creative spark is there, but how to exercise it and to what effect?

While those dusty old tomes and heavy, leather-bound books crowd the library, nature is open and free. Yet Gaia too has her faults. Having disparaged the usefulness of the written word, Emerson proposes to redeem the print edition of nature. He suggests that an understanding of one's relation to nature is arrived at through the reading of signs. Language, in this sense, is all-pervasive, and nature lends itself to our lexicon. Emerson contends:

Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch.⁵

Language takes on a dynamic dimension by which it participates in – is part and parcel of – the world around it. Each and every word, a “natural fact,” is a placeholder manifestly made to sound, look, and feel like its physical counterpart. The snares and traps set by the sophist are no match for the scholar awakened to an understanding of nature and his relation to it. As Emerson writes: “Wise men pierce [...] rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God.”⁶ Man, therefore, shares a common bond with his progenitor. A gossamer-thin thread connects the earthbound mortal with the heavenly spheres, linking the celestial to the terrestrial by way of word.

In addition to this connection to the divine, the scholar gains a closer relation to his fellow layman. Emerson comments:

Thus is nature an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men. A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth, and his desire to communicate it without loss.⁷

The transcendent takes hold, rooting itself in our very words, permeating every page. The chimera and illusion of the visible world hides deeper truths. The value of the poet, the painter, and the sculptor is to tempt, to tease, to entice us toward these. But to confuse the imitative with the real is a grave mistake, since art can never achieve reality. Nature not only shows the

deficiencies, the incongruities, and the shortcomings of man's artifice, it invites the observer into itself, so as to do away with distorted representations and allow all to experience the living world first-hand.

With that in mind, it is important to note that while the learned and the layman share a common bond, they nevertheless retain their respective differences. Emerson anticipates the feelings of injustice and inequity between two neighbors: one having ventured into the woods and returning with absolute peace and understanding, the other coming back with a hollow heart, an even more hollow head, and a pile of kindling. Where, then, is the forlorn and less fortunate of these two neighbors to turn if nature refuses to reveal her guarded secrets? There is, at least, the consolation of literature, which may spur you on to spiritual discovery or leave you contented in your vicarious adventure. But here Emerson arrives at a sort of existential crisis: there is no standard for comparing the experience of one man with that of another. Though connected to some sort of primordial truth and, in turn, to one another, each and every individual is nevertheless given to independent understanding and a subjective shaping of meaning. Is the multiplicity of man a godsend or a curse? Is divine and collective unity through nature possible? Surely, there can be no agreement.

Emerson goes on the defensive: "Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus."⁸ So there is a sort of infinite variety of interpretation familiar to every man in his changing attitudes and perceptions. A capricious nature given to whim hardly seems like a comfort, but Emerson argues its necessity:

When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects.⁹

Emerson thus finds solace within the prescribed boundaries of experience. If nature were to reveal herself unendingly, the mystery and charm would be gone. Familiarity breeds contempt, and nature, like Emerson's well-studied books, would lose its lustre after a while. Nature's secrets would be wasted if lavished on but one man, or worse, all men. To take the extraordinary and make ordinary is a sinful thing. Men, likewise, are not to be admired for their constancy and singular devotion to one idea of nature, but for their varying points of view – the full spectrum. Change is the antidote to boredom:

The secret of the illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*.¹⁰

The changing seasons, the ebb and flow of the tide, and the waxing and waning of the moon all mirror the inconstancy of man, who is always in a state of motion and emotion. The part gives rise to the whole, or as Emerson puts it: “Of course, [one] needs the whole society, to give the symmetry we seek. The parti-coloured wheel must revolve very fast to appear white. Something is learned too by conversing with so much folly and defect.”¹¹

It is through this idea of a system in which the whole supports the parts and the parts support the whole that Emerson reconciles the contradictions inherent in his vision. For “when there are parts of a whole [...] the whole will be described as being in itself. [As] a thing is described in terms of its parts, as well as in terms of the thing as a whole.”¹² Being trapped in a hollow sphere of illusion, forever cut off from the godhead has limited prospects. Ecstatic union and rapturous being sound wonderful, but in reality, nature is a harsh mistress. While Emerson avails us to find communion with nature, he admits the difficulty in doing so. The individuality of experience must be considered, and the individual’s communion with nature must remain individual. Emerson reassures us that it is as a part of the whole that we each fit in. The unity to be found in nature lies within a “change of objects.”¹³

Notes

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. B, 7th ed., eds. Nina Bayme et al. (New York: Norton, 2007), 1112.

All subsequent citations of Emerson’s work refer to this anthology.

² *Ibid.*, 1110.

³ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 1139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1141.

⁵ Emerson, “Nature,” 1118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1119.

⁸ “Experience,” 1197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1199.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1200.

¹² Aristotle, *Physics*, eds. David Bostock and Robin Waterfield, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), IV 220a, 25-30.

¹³ “Experience,” 1199.