

Apocalypse of the Mind or Creative Middle Ground

God, Nature and Humankind

In Emerson's *Nature*

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* stands out as a seminal work in early American literature. It is most often read today in the context of American literary history, and indeed as a secularizing force in American society. For Unitarian Universalists, however, Emerson looms large as one of our early influential religious thinkers. Unitarian historian Conrad Wright's volume, popular in seminary education, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, includes Emerson and the entire text of his Divinity School Address, which he gave to Harvard Divinity School's graduating class in 1838. In Unitarian history, Emerson and the Transcendentalists are read primarily as contributing to the turn inward for religious authority and experience. According to Wright, "Emerson's generation was beginning to assert that the truths of religion and morality" are "immediate intuitions of the divine."¹ It is commonly noted that the Transcendentalists had a love for the natural world.²

Given the ecological concerns of the twenty-first century, religions are increasingly entering what Mary Evelyn Tucker has called an ecological phase. She writes, "now is the moment for the religions to move forward boldly with comprehensive narrative perspectives that are grounded in relevant traditional resources, open to a sense of wonder, and guided by inspiring moral visions for shaping human-Earth relations for a sustainable future."³ In the effort to uncover

¹ Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986) 23. See also *Conrad Wright, A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989); David Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985), 105-111; and David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 80.

² Wright, 45; Parke, 105; Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, 80.

³ Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder: Religions Enter Their Ecological Phase* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 51. Currently Dr. Tucker is a Senior Lecturer in Religion and the Environment at Yale

what she names as, “relevant traditional resources,” it seems possible that a closer examination of Emerson’s view of nature itself and the relationship among nature, humankind, and God could be fruitful for understanding this aspect of the theological heritage of Unitarianism in the nineteenth century.

In Unitarian scholarship, David Robinson begins this work in *Apostle of Culture*, and Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock have a critical read in their recent work, *Saving Paradise*. In this paper, I will focus on Emerson’s first published book, *Nature*, paying particular attention to the relationship among nature, humankind, and God. I argue that in a particularly nineteenth century fashion, Emerson holds open what, this many years later, appears to be a contradiction between nature having an actual, physical reality and nature existing only in so much as the human mind perceives it. Thus, while he has often been read as promoting an excessive individualism that eclipses all other aspects of creation in the shadow of the human mind, I argue that his thinking offers more than that. There is another part to his story. Emerson’s theology of nature celebrates its influence by science and posits that nature is intrinsically valuable, an embodiment of beauty, fluid and in constant flux; a manifestation of creative spirit; a window to the divine; a unity of diversity; and an educator of humankind. Whether or not we find his moral claims for nature to be sufficient, Emerson’s thinking on nature has much to offer as we ground our contemporary constructions of Unitarian Universalist ecotheology in our theological heritage.

University. While a visiting scholar at the GTU in 2001-02, she gave the Second Master Hsuan Hua Memorial Lecture which became the book referenced here.

It is important first to understand that his book is not a systematic theological text, nor a purely philosophical one. It is a combination of prose and poetry that addresses literary, philosophical, theological, and ethical concerns. It is divided into eight sections: I. Nature, II. Commodity, III. Beauty, IV. Language, V. Discipline, VI. Idealism, VII. Spirit, and VIII. Prospects. Through his journals and letters, scholars have traced a wide variety of influences on Emerson's thinking, an eclectic collection of science, philosophy, literary criticism, religion, and poetry that would rival the breadth of worship sources of any contemporary Unitarian Universalist church: Plato and Platonism, Plotinus, the Bishop Berkeley, Coleridge, the German Idealists, Goethe, Swedenborg and his followers Sampson Reed and Guillaume Oegger, the sacred texts of Hinduism, Mary Rotch, William Ellery Channing, Edward Taylor, "the old books by Flavel, Law, Scougal, and à Kempis," Carlyle, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism.⁴ While much has been written on any one of these influences, my aim here is not to trace its religious and philosophical foundations, rather I will utilize a close textual analysis to draw out Emerson's view of the interconnections among nature, God, and humankind.

Emerson opens *Nature* with the claim that "The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face..." and questions, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"⁵ Already in his opening paragraph, he delineates "God" and "nature," and suggests that human beings could have an original relation

⁴ Kenneth Cameron, *Young Emerson's Transcendental Vision: An Exposition of His World View With An Analysis of the Structure, Backgrounds, and Meanings of Nature (1836)* (Hartford: Trinity College Transcendental Books, 1971) and Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), 184-185.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 23. All other references to *Nature* come from this volume and will be indicated by a page number in the text.

with both. He differentiates between the philosophical meaning of the word “nature” and its common meaning:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE...*Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf (24).

He says he uses the word in both senses. He relies on a philosophical definition that separates soul from body, and in this sense humankind from nature.

Nature in Flux

Emerson further defines the NOT ME by delineating some of its qualities. To begin with, he says nature is fluid and in flux. In his opening paragraph, he writes nature’s “floods of life stream around and through us” (23). The image of water is striking, as it is constantly in motion as well as ubiquitous in all living things. His use of “floods” rather than the more contained “rivers” gives this metaphor a sense of abundance as well as denoting the unpredictable power of nature. Nature then is the constantly moving, unpredictable flow of life in which we find ourselves, and which flows through us. Later he expounds upon the continual change in nature, “To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again. The heavens change every moment... The state of the crop in the surrounding farms alters the expression of the earth from week to week” (30). Here, he conveys not only the notion of perpetual change, but also nature’s fleeting quality. A moment in nature will never be the same again. While Emerson’s fluid

sense of nature steers clear of chaos or chance because of its “design” (23), as we will see later, his understanding of nature as changing and fluid is especially notable when contrasted with the eighteenth-century’s view of nature as the Great Machine, stable, predictable, and dependable.⁶

Nature’s Unity in Variety

Encompassing this constant motion, Emerson ascribes to nature a great unity. He writes of “the unity in variety,—which meets us everywhere” (43). For Emerson, this unity is a “rule of one art, or law of one organization” that pervades all nature. He crystallizes his vision from his experience in Paris in the *Jardin des Plantes*⁷, “A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole...Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world” (43). Each part is not only connected to the whole, but in itself reflects the whole, or indeed is the “microcosm” of the whole. He elaborates

The law of harmonic sounds reappears in the harmonic colors...The river, as it flows, resembles the air that flows over it; the air resembles the light which traverses it with more subtile currents; the light resembles the heat which rides with it through Space. Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same (44).

Without the aid or insight of particle physics or quantum mechanics, Emerson posits a universe with an underlying unity that causes all things to resemble one another at their root. But Emerson was more of a theologian than a scientist, and Emerson’s

⁶ See Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination From Edwards to Bushnell* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 1-4.

⁷ Robert D. Richardson, in his authoritative intellectual biography of Emerson, writes, “Emerson’s moment of insight into the interconnectedness of things in the *Jardin des Plantes* was a moment of almost visionary intensity” (Richardson, 138-43). Upon his return home Emerson enthusiastically set out to be a naturalist, but he quickly realized he did not have the temperament for methodical scientific work. Instead, his interest in science became essentially theological.

insights into nature's quality of unity in variety stems not only from his observations of nature, but also from his view of the spiritual unity behind nature, as we will see later in this paper.

Emerson's understanding of unity does not press toward an elimination of diversity, or homogenization, rather each thing retains its specificity and fluidity, its "variety," and is radically interconnected in an organic whole. Yet, in this conception of a whole, he pays little attention to the less sublime elements of nature. He does not dwell on decay, disease, or natural disaster. He writes, "Nature never wears a mean appearance" (25). One could argue that he suggests the proper seeing of nature reveals beauty and radical interconnection even in these less appealing aspects of nature as evidenced in the line "Even the corpse has its own beauty" (29). But when taken as a whole, he clearly receives more inspiration for his views from the bucolic aspects of nature. Images of walking through the woods, gazing at horizons above the farmland, looking up the stars, flowers, rivers, rocks, fields of corn and melon ripening in the sun predominate in his writing. I agree with Karen Baker-Fletcher's assertion that Emerson's "emphasis leaves me wanting a more thorough accounting of nature's gritty side, the awesome, awful side of nature's beauty."⁸

Animated Nature

Before moving to Emerson's understanding of the spirit behind nature's interconnected whole, it is important to explore the final two characteristics of nature in Emerson's view that I will mention in this paper—nature's animated and

⁸ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 30-31.

moral qualities. By nature's animated qualities, I am referring to the way he uses language to indicate nature's activity. In the early part of the essay, he writes that nature's "floods of life...*invite* us, by the powers they supply, to action" (23, emphasis mine). Later, "the stars *awaken* a certain reverence" (25, emphasis mine). And again, "Nature *says*,—he is my creature, and...he shall be glad with me" (25, emphasis mine). In these instances, and many others, Emerson's near personification of nature indicates ways that nature initiates something to which humans respond in a fluid, creative process. He ascribes nature with a power to affect something within the human. While each could be brushed aside as a figure of speech to convey something that happens within the human when encountering nature, when read with these next passages, it seems clear that Emerson attributes a kind of initiation to nature, external to the human: "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them" (26); and "Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (32). In each of these passages, nature seems to initiate relationship. Nature acknowledges human as friend to friend, nodding a greeting and stretching arms in an embrace. In the relationship, nature is given an active role external to humankind, and nature seeks a response from the human—a nod in return, or an elevated kind of thought.

Nature Ministers to Humankind

This animated quality of nature leads to Emerson's understanding of nature's uses, which in Emerson's view are various ways nature ministers to humankind. At

this point it is important to note the way in which Emerson conceives of all of nature serving the needs, both physical and spiritual, of humankind. He is quite blunt about it. He writes, nature “is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode” (42). This placing of humankind in a hierarchy above nature is not surprising given Emerson’s social and religious background. Robinson puts it this way, “Emerson, is, of course, still bound to the teleological assumption of the primacy of man in creation.”⁹ In Emerson’s cosmology, he conceives of the interaction of nature and humankind as occurring for the benefit of human beings.

He writes first of Nature’s healing or restorative function: “In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity...which nature cannot repair” (26). Emerson, of course, does not mean that nature will literally fix the losses or troubles of life, but that the experience of being in the woods or among the farmlands comforts, reconnects, and reorients the human being to all of creation. In nature, one becomes receptive to the chance occurrence of an experience of a brief moment of non-separation or mystical union when, “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (26). For Emerson, these experiences serve to put everything back into proper perspective, making the common concerns of everyday life pale in comparison to the reality of being “the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (26). While these excerpts send us toward unpacking his understanding of the connection of God and nature, I will resist for the time being

⁹ Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, 80.

and stay focused on his understanding of the functions of nature, as I attempt to create order for this paper out of his flowing and intertwining concepts.

Emerson outlines the other uses of nature in his sections on commodity, beauty, language, and discipline. Nature nourishes our bodies and souls, delights us, illuminates virtue, satisfies the soul's desire for beauty, provides symbols for communication through language, and provides moral education. There is not space here to unpack each one of these, but I turn now to the final quality of nature discussed in this paper.

Nature is Moral

In Emerson's view nature is moral. He writes, "All things are moral" and later, "The ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made" (42). He goes on, "The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal, preach to us" (43). This moral quality of nature is embedded in its very core—the stems of plants and the interior of bones—the very places where the transactions that give life take place. And it goes out, like the light of the sun and the stars, to the farthest reaches of the universe. But what can it mean that nature itself is moral? Emerson expounds on it this way:

...the sailor, the shepherd, the miner, the merchant, in their several resorts, have each an experience precisely parallel, and leading to the same conclusion: because all organizations are radically alike. Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment which thus scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul. The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him. Who can estimate this? (43)

Here again is the sense that the moral element of nature is deep in its very fabric—growing in the grain and impregnating the water—and goes out to humankind to be “caught.” In this passage Emerson’s complete confidence in nature’s ability to illumine truth is evident. It rests on the interaction between the intuitive understanding of the human and the moral profession of nature. There is also the notion that this moral sense of nature cannot quite be pinned down or quantified, as he asks rhetorically, “Who can estimate this?” Finally, this passage is built around the assertion that “all organizations are radically alike,” which seems to be key in his understanding of the morality of nature, though he does not make a strong enough argument for the unity of nature providing evidence of its moral essence for this contemporary reader.

This moral quality of nature was extremely important to Emerson. It comes at the end of his section on discipline, which completes his ascending scale of the uses of nature. In Emerson’s understanding of nature, the stakes he places on this assertion are very high. Robinson explains, “To Emerson, for whom moral perception was the essence of religion, the moral gap created when revealed religion was rejected posed a serious problem.”¹⁰ Emerson, like many theological thinkers of his day had rejected miracles as evidence of divine authority and had troubled scriptural authority through the study of history. This left many open questions about the sources of religious truth and authority, and for Emerson religion was nothing if it was not related to how one lives a life. Robinson argues

¹⁰ Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, 77.

that *Nature* brings Emerson's concern with practical morality to the forefront.¹¹

Emerson elaborates in this passage:

Sensible objects conform to the premonitions of Reason and reflect the conscience. All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore, is nature glorious with form, color, and motion; that every globe in the remotest heaven, every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life, every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf, to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine, every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore is Nature ever the ally of Religion: lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment. Prophet and priest, David, Isaiah, Jesus, have drawn deeply from this source. (42)

From a contemporary perspective, this aspect of Emerson's thought seems suspect.¹² In some ways does not nature show us whatever it is we are seeking—a kind of proof-text? While we might question whether it is adequate, it seems Emerson places his trust in what we might call intuition, or what he calls here the “premonitions of Reason” and “the conscience.” Again, it is in the relationship between nature and the human being that truth is revealed. He writes, “A virtuous man is in unison with her works” (32). It is as if the human being properly aligned to virtue will experience nature in a way that will reverberate, indicating harmony with the truth found in nature, like a singer making a sound that finds the resonant frequency of a room. To understand more thoroughly how this works for Emerson, then, it is important to explore his understanding of the relationship between spirit and nature.

¹¹ Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, 86-87.

¹² Even among Transcendentalists at the time, Emerson had critics in this direction. Philip Gura explores Orestes Brownson's objections to Emerson putting the human soul at the center of the universe and his worry that his thought did not lead to obedience to moral law in *American Transcendentalism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 120-1.

Perception of Nature or Does It Outwardly Exist?

In Emerson's cosmology there is a clear distinction between a person's body and its *me*, or soul, the former being part of nature. Moreover, he creates a kind of barrier between nature and humankind, positing that nature is "unchanged by man." Clearly Emerson was yet to perceive in mid-nineteenth century New England the ways in which humankind would irrevocably alter nature and its processes, although it had already occurred in Europe. Later he suggests a certain kind of connection, though the soul and nature retain their distinctness: there is a "wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world...because he is its head and heart" (57). The capacity for thought and feeling, the mind and soul of the human is more closely connected with God, though the human's body is part of nature. Humankind therefore thinks and feels for all of creation.

Immediately, this orientation toward the human soul and nature opens into a philosophical problem that vexed the nineteenth century. How could the head and heart know the body? Or more plainly, how can the human being be certain of the reality/external existence of what is perceived through the senses? This is particularly troubling for Emerson in his essay, since his answer to his concern about practical morality rests so thoroughly on nature's ministry to the human soul. In terms of the question posed for this paper about Emerson's view on nature, we might say, "Does Emerson believe nature/creation exists at all?"

He wrestles with this in his section on Idealism. "A noble doubt perpetually suggests itself,—...whether nature outwardly exists" (45). Try as he might, Emerson cannot escape this "noble doubt." But he does not allow it to derail his argument.

In my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses, to know whether the impressions they make on me correspond with outlying objects, what difference does it make, whether Orion is up there in heaven or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul? The relations of parts and the end of the whole remaining the same...Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me (46).

He formulates an Idealism with an intimate God, involved moment by moment in creation, painting the images of nature upon the human soul. He makes a nod to the pressing metaphysical question of his time, but he preserves his explication of the qualities and uses of nature nonetheless by side-stepping the question—"what difference does it make?"

But he goes further when he cautions against the tendency of the Idealist's viewpoint to devalue nature. "I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons. Let us speak her fair. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest. I only wish to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man" (52). As Donald Pease points out, "The meaning of the passage reduces to I do and I do not wish to derealize nature."¹³ Emerson holds a dynamic tension between his desire for an "original relation"¹⁴ with the universe and the de-realizing logic of Idealism.

Perhaps it is exactly this tension that opens up the importance of his section, "Spirit" for his theology of creation. Eliding nature and the figure of Jesus, Emerson suggests nature's "perpetual effect" is that she "suggests the absolute...a great

¹³ Donald Pease, "Emerson, Nature, and the Sovereignty of Influence" *boundary 2* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1980), 66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/302961> (accessed April 12, 2011).

¹⁴ One of the questions that opens Emerson's essay is "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (23)

shadow pointing always to the sun behind us”(53), and later “the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God” (54). Nature, for Emerson, reveals God to humankind. It does so because nature is created by and is pervaded by spirit. It is useful to follow his argument step-by-step.

First he offers a critique of Idealism. He grants, “Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry,” acknowledging that it is an important corrective to the purely mechanistic understanding of nature. Then goes on, “Yet, if it only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end” (54). Emerson wants to take matter seriously, precisely because “It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it” (54). Again, nature is a mediating force. It reveals God and calls us to God. He believes that without contact with the divine revealed in nature, humankind loses its way in the “labyrinth of...perceptions.”

He asks, therefore, “Whence is matter? And Whereto?” which leads him to this conclusion, which I will quote at length because it is key to his position:

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates, that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God...[W]e learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (55)

Key to Emerson's understanding of nature is that spirit, which he equates with the Supreme Being, is the creator. It is "behind" and "throughout" nature. This understanding allowed him to write earlier in the essay, "There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God" (39). Nature is not accidental. It is pre-formed, indeed preexisting in the "mind of God." It has a design and an order in Emerson's view. He writes, "We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy" (23). As I understand his thinking it goes like this: the Supreme Being creates a perfect creation according to orderly laws and designs for the purpose of calling humankind toward God. Spirit reveals itself to humankind through nature, educating humankind toward moral perfection.

This leaves unexplained the more enigmatic part of the passage: "therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old." This is Emerson's attempt to reconcile the problem of the "realness of nature" presented by Idealism and Emerson's love of nature, his "beautiful mother" and "gentle nest," that, in its moral perfection, reveals God to humankind. This is the core of Emerson's relationship between nature and the human, his "harmony of both" (26). It is as if nature is made real because we perceive and respond to its initiation.

Even as Emerson states that spirit creates nature through us, he continues to make a separation between nature and humankind. "The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God...But it differs from the body in one important respect. It is not, like that, now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind" (55). Emerson's positioning of the human being at the pinnacle of creation is again clear. Nature retains its distinctness from the human. The human has access to the mind of the creator, in fact the human will makes human kind the "creator in the finite," and the only way to access the mind of the creator is through nature, "the present expositor of the divine mind." Nature avails itself to humankind as a text through which the divine can be known and humankind prepares to perceive and experience nature well, indeed in this experiencing nature, humankind makes matter real. In Emerson's words, "[Man] is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man" (35).

Perceiving Nature

If humankind's perception and experience of nature is the linchpin in both the Supreme Being's putting forth of nature through us as well as the human ability to interpret the divine by understanding nature's exposition of the divine mind, then it becomes clear how important the faculties of human perception are in Emerson's understanding of the relationship between nature, human and God. For Emerson, it requires humankind to train the senses to "see" properly. "The lover of nature is he

whose inward and outward sense are still truly adjusted to each other” (25). It is the capacity to both see the forms and to feel in the heart the spirit behind the forms. For Emerson, this capacity is more pure in childhood, but needs to be retrained in adulthood. “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (25). The training of the senses then, for the adult, requires a kind of spiritual practice. He writes, “A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text” (39). It flows in a circle, or perhaps a spiral. Living a virtuous life clears the eyes to see nature more accurately and deeply, which then reveals more of her text. Emerson lays it out clearly.

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. (60)

For Emerson, perceiving nature well or accurately, becoming “a naturalist,” is inextricable from loving the spirit shining through it. It is a spiritual union, an alignment, within a human being that allows the human to perceive the spiritual unity of the world.

In this complex formulation of a perception of nature Emerson calls upon poetry and prayer. Early on in *Nature* he writes, “When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind... It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter from the tree of the poet” (25). The poet, “he whose eye can integrate all the parts” (25) has a sensibility that can more accurately see nature. Again, it is the seeing of the whole beyond the parts and

the spirit behind and among nature that is key. Toward the end of the essay he writes specifically of prayer, “Is not prayer also a study of truth,—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite?” (60). Here he is juxtaposing the empirical, analytical search for truth in nature by which, “they freeze their subject under the wintry light of the understanding” (60) with the prayerful, thoughtful approach using the “fire of the holiest affections” (61). If the later is employed, he maintains, “then will God go forth anew into the creation” (61). By training our senses, our poetic sensibilities, and our prayerful inquiries into nature and truth, Emerson believes we shall “come to look at the world with new eyes” (61) and in doing so we will do our part in building the world.

Much has been made of Emerson’s orphic poet concluding *Nature* with the command to “Build therefore your own world” and the notion of “the kingdom of man over nature” (62). Particularly in combination with some of his later work, especially “Self-Reliance,” it is correct to note and critique the threads of excessive individualism and androcentric hierarchies, as well as his placement of humankind at the center of the cosmos—“Know then that the world exists for you” (61).¹⁵ But as we have seen, Emerson is more complex than that. By focusing on his position in the second part of *Nature* exclusively, without taking into account the first part nor his qualifiers on Idealism, we only get an eclipsed understanding Emerson’s *Nature*.

Emerson’s work does have its contradictions. On the one hand he believed nature was real, an externally existing manifestation of God’s creation. On the other, he believed the true substance was that which lay behind and beyond nature—idea

¹⁵ See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 382-386.

and spirit. Emerson did not resolve these contraries. Emerson himself seemed little bothered by them. He writes, “Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me” (46). Each perspective has its corresponding ethical imperatives. On the one hand he advised kneeling before the wisdom of a moral nature, living in loving harmony with it. Yet, if nature was truly a phenomenon, then it was entirely at the mercy of humankind’s efforts to mold and shape it to suit their ends, and Emerson advised humankind to do so. It is Emerson’s refusal to collapse these two views into a single resolution which Catherine Albanese suggests is useful in providing contemporary environmentalism a religious theoretical framework that is more nuanced and complex than currently exists:

Perhaps the earth will be healthiest and happiest if humans see things religiously and see them religiously several ways at once. Perhaps Americans need with ethical seriousness, to acknowledge among the animals some, but not all rights. It may be that at certain seasons they need to rest their weary heads on the bosom of the divine mother Gaia and at others to own themselves part of her...It may be, finally, that at still other times Americans need to focus their energies on the interactive human communities that they must create now—at once using nature, respecting nature, and taking delight in her splendid autonomy.¹⁶

Emerson, then provides fruitful ground for a religious model for environmentalism, presenting a “moral middle ground,” a source of “creativity and hope.”¹⁷ Moreover, when we hold simultaneously both views about where nature exists—a “substantial existence without” or “in the apocalypse of the mind”—and rest our gaze on the reasons Emerson finds nature “useful” and “venerable,” we gain access to a nuanced

¹⁶ Catherine Albanese, “Having Nature All Ways: Liberal and Transcendental Perspectives on American Environmentalism,” *Journal of Religion* 77, no. 1 (January 1997): 43.

¹⁷ Albanese, 43.

reading of nature and the relationship among humans, God, and nature that may prove to be fruitful ground from our current vantage point. Whether or not we find his moral claims for nature to be sufficient, Emerson's nature has intrinsic value as the manifestation of the creative spirit, a revelator of the divine, and as a companion and teacher for humankind. Nature's forms and creatures give "delight *in and for themselves*" (28) as beauty. Emerson recognizes the fluidity and flux of nature, the radical interconnectedness of all existence, the "microcosm" that "faithfully renders the likeness of the world," and the unity in diversity that is the whole of nature. Emerson's theology of nature is unabashedly informed by science as he understood it. His complex views of nature, God, and humankind, in all their nuances and contradictions, will do much to inform Unitarian Universalism's understanding of its theological resources as it enters an ecological phase.

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