

Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Relationship Between Nature and the Self

By Ingrid Mao

ABSTRACT: In his essays Nature (1836) and Self-Reliance (1841), Ralph Waldo Emerson phenomenally illuminates nineteenth century Transcendentalist philosophy through his divulgence of the occult relationship between Nature and the Self. In particular, the symbiotic collaboration between humankind and our natural world reveals physical objects as the the earthly conduit for spiritual truths. Yet, such corporeality is only elevated insofar as it is realised independently by the imaginative, spiritual, and intellectual capabilities of the human Self — namely, the articulation of Truth through the vivid poetry of Language as well as the display of Virtue by all men and women. Should translations differ from one to the other, individuals should each be allowed their own authentic Truth — or, in Emerson’s words, ‘an original relation to the universe’. Indeed, the prescriptive lens with which society fashions humanity distorts our perception of reality, leaving us fettered to the tethers of Social Constitution and thereby reliant upon institutions to forge and mediate a connection with something to which we are so intrinsically connected. It is only when recognise our own constitution in — and seek communion with — Nature can we partake in a catharsis that purges the Soul of dross and thus brings us back to a pure state of being, akin to that of the child, which precedes the contamination of our consciousness by age, experience, and society

In his meditation on the immanence of the Divine within Nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson critically divulges the occult relationship between the human Soul and the Cosmos, Nature and the Self. With references to Emerson’s two essays *Self-Reliance* (1841) and *Nature* (1836), this paper shall seek to explore the symbiotic collaboration between human beings and our natural world; in particular, the uses of Nature – Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline – in its ministry to humankind, as well as the necessary reciprocation of such providence by all men and women via displays of Virtue. In light of Emerson’s exposition of humanity’s perception of Nature in his latter essay, I shall posit that the phenomenal world observed by the human eye serves as the earthly conduit for spiritual truths and a metonym for Transcendentalist philosophy. With regards to our understanding of the nature of Nature, let it be established that She embodies, in Emerson’s words, all the ‘essences unchanged by man’ (1836, 6). As such, Nature can be

viewed as a frame of reference that discloses the extent to which humankind deviates from the 'Aboriginal Self' (1841), an untainted state of being that is renewed upon an individual's communion with Nature. It is when She is utilised to effect secondary desires – such as that of power, material wealth, and debauchery – that we cease to enjoy a primary relationship with the Universe, and, consequently, develop a reliance upon institutions to forge and mediate a connection with something to which we are so intrinsically connected. Only when we unchain our Self from the tethers of Social Constitutions can we recognise our own constitution in Nature, and thus realise the Self-Reliant Universal Being that reconciles our inner and outer senses – so too, the substance and essence of our Spirit.

In its lowest functions – that is, according to Emerson, Commodity and Beauty – Nature is rendered as a cathartic spectacle, the reception of which revitalises and restores health to the observer. Indeed, in Chapter III of *Nature* (1836), Emerson writes,

The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon.... I seem to partake [Nature's] rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sun-set and moon-rise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams.

Emerson's account of his reverence for Nature in this passage encompasses landscapes that exist across time and space. His disregard for temporal and spatial limitations, moreover, evinces the eternal verity of Nature as a spiritual constant, integrating the different realms of human experience – such as the physical, astral, phenomenal, intellectual, and mystical – to descry the Unity that pervades all beings. Of this wholeness, Emerson proceeds to express the omnipresence of its parts through the analogy of 'a sphere, comprising all possible circles...[with] innumerable sides' (1841, 44). The presence of such analogies, metaphors, and metonyms are persistent throughout Emerson's oeuvre, the significance of which I will elaborate upon further in the latter section of this paper.

Furthermore, the influence which Nature has upon the metamorphic processes of the Soul is strongly evident as Emerson effuses the melding of man into his landscape, declaring that he wishes to 'partake [Nature's] rapid transformations' and recognising the interconnectedness resulting from the 'active enchantment' of his physical being – 'my dust' – with the metaphysical elements. The speaker seems to 'dilate' with the elements, allowing a universal current to flow in and out of him, breathing life into that which surrounds him as they into him. Indeed, Emerson writes, 'Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive', referring to the eternal quality of Truth, its transmission between earthly vessels, and the notion of life as its own creative end. When the Self is, in Emerson's words, 'in alliance with truth and God', it is able to receive Nature like a 'transparent eyeball' (1836, 10) that does not deflect, but rather embraces, the light of Truth which shines into the heart of humanity. In fact, the Self becomes the eyeball — a metaphor which upbraids the conditioned lenses that filter humankind's immediate connection with God and subsequently distort their perceptions of reality. In many ways, those who view the world through such lenses of perception tend to allocate their inability to recognise their occult relation with Divinity to the baseness of physical and material objects. However, is Emerson merely denouncing the material world, or is he postulating that the intangible elements of the Soul are indeed manifested on the material plane of reality through tangible objects? Should we, then, reject their corporeality? Or should we observe them as the symbols and reflections of the God that is at once within and beyond our own Self?

In his work *Nature's Economy* (1994), Donald Worster identifies the Transcendental idealism of Emerson as one which tends to 'devalue the material world except insofar as it could be put to higher spiritual uses by the human mind'. Accordingly, in his exposition on the uses of Nature in Language and Discipline, Emerson proposes the following:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.

Indeed, observing Nature merely for its physical beauty falls somewhat short of the scope of the lessons humankind can take from our surrounding landscape. As he traces back to the genesis of language and the origin of each word in vivid poetry, the reader becomes aware of the idea of language as a rhetorical medium for material objects, which, in turn, serve as metonymic extensions of spiritual facts. The examples which Emerson provides to explain this empiricism include the linguistic normalities of 'straight' meaning 'right', 'twisted' meaning 'wrong', the 'wind' representing 'spirit', and 'the raising of an eyebrow' to denote superciliousness. He, moreover, praises the 'piquancy' (1836, 29) of a language sustained by Nature, in addition to the 'radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts', thereby supporting Worster's position that the integrity of material existence is elevated insofar as it appeals to and engages with the intellect. This view is further espoused by Marissa Lopez who comments in her essay *The Sentimental Politics of Language* (2011) that it is indeed 'the imaginative power of the individual human being' that espies the subliminal qualities in Nature and translates them into God's will. Yet, this, I do not believe, affirm those readings – such as that which is held by Kris Fresonke – that trace Emerson's view on a tropical Nature to the theological argument for design and Nature as the empirical evidence for a Creator.

The aspects of design may have been alluded to by Emerson to explain the destiny of America as the chosen land and a promising new nation. However, I shall hold that supernatural qualities of Nature, that which ostensibly support the existence of God, are only present insofar as it is realised independently by the imaginative, spiritual, and intellectual capabilities of the human Self. This may portend a conflict between subjective translations of what is perhaps characterised as an objective external world; but individuals can only confirm for themselves what appears before their eyes. Should observations differ from one to another, the individual should be allowed their own authentic Truth — 'an original relation to the universe' (1836, 1). Indeed, references to youth throughout Emerson's writing suggest that the presence of the child can be seen as the physical manifestation of the purest state of humanity, prior to the contamination of our consciousness by age, experience, and society. The child lives in the present and pays no attention to the traditions which adults around him religiously preach. He is in many ways like the timeless Rose delineated in *Self-Reliance*; that is, a symbol of eternal perfection which 'make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what

they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence'. Here, the child, the rose, and Nature are said to transcend all traditional and foreign forces that exist in time and space. Indeed, the human mind itself is infinite, limited only by the reigns imposed by society, whose principle instrument of oppression is conformity. Thus, through the image of the rose, Emerson presents his readers with a blueprint for the self-sufficing and self-reliant soul, one that is capable of renovating a mendicant society of 'parlous soldiers' (1841, 161) and restoring the creative powers that foster progress in a new land of promises.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's iconoclastic manner of admonishing the dominance of the words, traditions, and perceptions of ancestors acts as a powerful vehicle by which he awakens intuition as the guiding wisdom in life. Such realisations, argues Emerson, are, furthermore, realised through one's observation of Nature and the imagination of physical objects as the earthly conduit for spiritual Truth on the material plane of human reality. In one's communion with Nature, the observer and the observed meld into one, revealing all objects to be the modifications of one verity, just as each human being is 'part or particle of God' (1836, 10). Therefore, through his exposition on the relationship of the Self to Nature, Emerson — above all else — brings to light the Truth that it is the amalgamation of mind and matter, so too Nature and the Self, and not its separation, that provides the basis for wonder in human existence.

References

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