



## Interpretive Essay Article on Ralph Waldo Emerson's Book Nature

# Emerson and Earth's Natural Benevolence

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Our re-emergence into the world continues but with cautious optimism since variants of COVID-19 still rule the day in places where it encounters humans' skepticism, lack of economic resources, or disregard for scientific expertise. And yet, the other issue of grave importance, global ecological degradation, remains in the background, increasingly reminding us to intervene to reverse man-made harms which continue to threaten our delicate ecological systems.

Interestingly, one nineteenth century literary luminary's work reminds us about the special role that nature represents for our contemporary and future well-being on the planet. Ralph Waldo Emerson, during the early stages of the American Industrial Revolution, encouraged understanding and empathy toward our ecological systems by giving particular recognition to the "acorn, the grape, the pine-cone, the wheat ear, the egg, ... the butterfly, sea shells ... clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees" (*W* 1:16). While a major objective for writing *Nature* (1836) seemed to be to initiate confidence for a new American intellectual tradition, the book's chapter on Beauty appears to highlight nature's aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual contributions which serve to nurture a planetary well-being we cannot do without. Indeed, understanding each of these contributions can help us fulfill our reciprocal role in this crucial partnership as we commit anew to nurture and protect earth's important ecological systems; and, this includes renewing our commitment to improving human relations in our diverse communities. Therefore, exploring key sections of *Nature's* chapter on "Beauty" can serve to explain how humans can co-create global well-being through engagement with nature's aesthetic, spiritual, and intellectual contributions to life on earth. We begin with a brief contextual background on *Nature*.

## Background

While there were few known early nineteenth century American writers such as novelists William Hill Brown and Washington Irving, it would fall upon Ralph Waldo Emerson to initiate greater impetus for North America's literary independence as a consequence of publishing *Nature*. Indeed, there was a need for a uniquely American literary culture as contemporary observers like Alexis De Tocqueville had earlier acknowledged in 1832 that "in few have great artists, distinguished poets, or famous writers been more rarely found" than in the United States (Tocqueville 524). During this time, the young American republic lacked philosophic, scientific, and artistic pedigree, as it had relied on British and European intellectual traditions to inform its New England culture, a fact Emerson lamented; he writes in his introduction to *Nature*, "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" (*W* 1:3). Emerson scholar Robert D. Richardson

writes, "Nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things —how things are: it was ... a foundation for philosophy, art, language, education, and everyday living" (3).

When writing *Nature*, Emerson focused on what there was an abundance of in the young United States, namely the natural ecology that had largely been the exclusive domain of numerous indigenous tribes. From nature's endowments was where much of every civilization's material and cultural pedigree came from and Emerson would acknowledge this at the outset of his literary career. Also informing much of his early literary work was the Romantic Age, an era during which a new emphasis on man's unity with nature was made more explicit in literature, art, music, or the maritime profession. For instance, the everyday life of a ship crew involves navigating through treacherous oceans while factoring the data inputs that come from the sun, moon, stars, or birds that signal the nearness of imminent land; Emerson cites Gibbon to make a deeper point about nature's support for human expertise in this maritime environment: "The winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators" (*W* 1:20). In Emerson's mind, humanity and nature demonstrate their unity by coexisting as competent and reliable partners; he writes further that a "virtuous man is in unison with her works ..." (*W* 1:22).

In *Nature's* chapter on Beauty, Emerson introduces us to a transcendentalist view of our ecological systems by describing some of its intangible influences which seem to correspond with the human dimensions of body, spirit, and mind; this means that, nature's aesthetical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions influence our daily lives in very concrete and beautiful ways if we're aware of these benevolent influences; experienced in combination, therefore, fulfills the transcendent desire for beauty in the human experience.

Indeed, Emerson asserts that a "nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty" (*W* 1:15); the perennial concept of beauty often communes with the two other essential human desires namely the necessity also for both truth and goodness. He affirms the autonomous value that nature represents when he writes "the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves*; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping" (*W* 1:15). But Emerson also recognizes our symbiotic relationship with ecological environments, asserting that "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone." He employs language that relates to the quadrivium section of the seven liberal arts; for instance, he uses terms such as "laws of light," "...well-colored and shaded globe," and "round and symmetrical" to begin his description on how the human eye informs the mind in its quest to understand the transcendent beauty the earth represents (*W* 1:15). These seeming scientific

terms inform a basic understanding of what artists call *aesthetics*, which, generally speaking, deals with the principles of beauty and artistic taste.

### The Aesthetical

Fully grasping the idea of aesthetics can sometimes be complicated given a particular group experience underway and its context but beauty is also, as the saying goes, *in the eye of the beholder*. Aesthetical concepts are rooted in philosophical traditions, and they usually involve the intersection of the human senses and emotions. Emerson writes, "Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection" (*W* 1:7-8). One might interpret Emerson's foregoing words in a romantic sense; namely that in spite of her kind allure, to know nature's essential wonders, force or deception should not be employed in the discovery process. In spite of subsequently discovering her most powerful wonders, nature never loses her lasting appeal to the most interested and astute of souls; indeed, a genuine and lasting relationship is possible with her, not simply a brief romantic encounter. Thus, a symbiotic relationship based on love, not simply human self-interest, sustains ecological wellbeing on into the future; this idea certainly also applies to human relationships as we reenter our world to encounter new opportunities for rediscovering our own tribe and members of the *other* as respectful equals as Emerson seems to encourage.

Emerson, begins his description about nature's aesthetic dimension with what seems a declaration to egalitarian values, namely nature's equal benefit to all regardless of occupational endeavor. He writes "The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself" (*W* 1:16). Simply reentering ecological environments affords the conscious individual the opportunity to restore her essence in the moment. Emerson affirms the experience that vision provides, but even a blind person who senses "eternal calm" in nature can also find himself as a man, which is more important than the precarious identities of attorney or tradesman (*W* 1:16). Indeed, as the Great Resignation proceeds in the world of work (Pazzanese, October 20, 2021), for many nature assists us in shedding fleeting and unsatisfying identities and reminds us about our inherent human qualities that, collectively, comprise our essential human identity.

Emerson fulfills the two main criteria required in aesthetical response, namely the appeal to the senses and emotions, by describing an interaction involving both his own eyesight and feelings. He uses literary juxtaposition in the following two quotations to achieve this; he writes "I see the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share" (*W* 1:17). Emerson asserts that after witnessing the morning spectacle among the tangible artifacts surrounding his homestead, an experience involving the pure emotions of an invisible angel arises within him. This visual and emotional

experience begins in the east where the sun rises but it also concludes with the clouds prominent in the west where the sun sets. He writes, "The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors" (*W* 1:17). We can discern a sort of paradox here that, while Emerson experiences an abundance of visual pleasure in the external environment, the emotional impact at the end of this day is akin to the internal pain of separating from a beloved friend or lover. His ability to juxtapose observation and emotion continues when he writes:

"I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. 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" (*W* 1:18).

It's certainly true that throughout the year nature offers us generosity and warmth, and often in the forms of emotional and visual experiences that are guaranteed to be new every moment. But sadly, these associations in time will never be experienced again; much like a beloved friend or family member whose time on earth has passed, we'll likely never see them again while others hope to someday. And yet, Emerson writes, "this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part" (*W* 1:19). Most of us are initially attracted to nature's aesthetic qualities but, as our relationship with it matures, we can begin discerning its spiritual influences and its propensity to partner with our efforts to do, or sustain, good in the world; but this requires our willingness to respect its preeminent role, awesome powers, and natural cycles as we cautiously reenter the emerging post-pandemic world.

### The Spiritual

For Emerson, nature's spiritual dimension informs human activities and, at best, our willingness to partner with these intangible influences will largely determine the level and scope of positive impact in the world; not understanding this spiritual partnership makes mankind vulnerable to the tragic consequences of egocentricity or social hubris. He writes, "The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will" (*W* 1:19). Nature not only has physical attraction, but experiencing its spiritual qualities make its beauty more complete. Moreover, Emerson believed that to experience the sacred aspect of nature's beauty, our human volition should be consonant with its preeminent role in the world. For instance, many can appreciate that when a farmer cooperates with the universe's seasonal cycles including earth's rain seasons, the photosynthesis process involving plants, and oxygenated soil, her seedling efforts in the soil will tend to produce an abundant harvest to, in turn, feed the community at large; and this

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benefit may include helping to feed those in the developing world whose crops have evaporated due to global climate change. He writes "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable" (*W* 1:10). Emerson posits that nature's occult influences also inform and affirm the human ideals which promote greater wellbeing among human relationships, especially within political domains.

It seems that nature also honors the normative social and political commitments humans socially construct amongst themselves. There is no doubt that democratic forms of human organization are currently under attack globally; indeed the case can be made in this moment in time that democratic societies are too unwieldy during political or public health crises, and so, authoritarian personalities seek the opportunity to also reverse progress in political, gender-based, and social freedoms and their accompanying obligations. According to Emerson, the universe sides with and affirms the individual who is *willing to act* on higher principle, or when an important ideal is at risk of being seriously undermined (emphasis mine); citing an example from history he writes:

Charles II., to intimidate the citizens of London, caused the patriot Lord Russel to be drawn in an open coach, through the principal streets of the city, on his way to the scaffold. "But," his biographer says, "the multitude imagined they saw liberty and virtue sitting by his side" (*W* 1:21).

The return of a non-democratic English monarchy led by Charles II alarmed many like Lord Russell, who was unfairly charged and executed for supposedly plotting to murder Charles's brother James. However, what seems to be at stake here is not Lord Russell's imperfect legacy, but a key democratic principle, namely that the state ought not be an instrument of political revenge, but of social justice. Moreover, Charles's abuse of political power in order to intimidate a free population, citizens or subjects, by also openly humiliating a prominent member of the people's House of Commons confirmed in the minds of many about the dangers of monarchical prerogatives. In spite of Russell's misfortune, Emerson asserts that "among sordid objects, an act of truth or heroism seems at once to draw to itself the sky as its temple, the sun as its candle" (*W* 1:21). A sordid political system which allows capricious and arbitrary forms of injustice can, in response, trigger a human willingness towards heroism, or sacrifice, which serves to expose to the light of day the true character of particular political systems and their representatives.

However, a transcendent human sense, what Emerson called our moral sense, can recognize virtue accompanying anyone's courageous action. Stephen E. Whicher characterizes Emerson's idea of the moral sense as "an innate, instinctive admiration for moral excellence at sight" (14); he writes further that for Emerson, "conscience was not to be explained

naturalistically. It was, as religion taught, the voice of God in the soul, teaching us an unquestionable law of conduct, testifying to that reality of a divine authority..." (14). However, our current willingness to renew our moral sense should be informed by progressive faith and science to create new and expanded notions of social justice for all sentient beings, including animals.

Often, civilizations or nations erect monuments, statues, or create works of art that celebrate cultural or natural artifacts worthy of duplication for display in a museum, private dwellings, or through the internet. In *Nature's* chapter on Beauty, Emerson asserts as well that ecological allure informs our imagination to such an emotional level that we strongly desire to replicate through art, for instance, a placid sunset, an inspiring meadow, or a raging ocean; often times we undertake creations of art to recall, if not attempt to recapture, those moments in nature that we may never see again.

### The Intellectual

Emerson completes the book's chapter on *Beauty* by describing how nature's aesthetic and spiritual dimensions make impressions upon our intellectual faculties which inform our imagination as we attempt to replicate or understand its beauty through concrete works of art. Emerson writes, "The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world" (*W* 1:23). A work of art serves as an imperfect concrete reflection of a perfect ecological reality in our planet. For instance, native New Englander Georgia O'Keefe introduced the beauty of northern New Mexico's sandy mesas to the rest of the country, if not the world; indeed, her heart and mind were genuinely transformed by the surrounding ecological character and its beckoning spirit to become one of the world's greatest 20th century painters of the American Southwest. Emerson writes "The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point ... in art does Nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (*W* 1:24).

Other influences from nature seem to inform hypothetical questions and later scientific research. He writes, "The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection" (*W* 1:22). As we grapple with the current anti-science sentiments expressed mainly within Western societies, Emerson reminds us that the attempt to understand the rules of nature requires objective analysis and evaluation that is free of personal biases. Understanding the true works of nature, be it about bee pollination, a pandemic, a Tsunami, an earthquake, or how an ant colony organizes its community, requires scientific epistemological methods that yield insights which can be confirmed by independent investigators; it is then possible to more accurately reproduce nature's genuine occult attributes and tangible features through diverse forms of art or environmental education.

Human wellbeing is often manifested in the confidence to be creative across an array of artistic or technical disciplines

and in the fruits of creativity. Emerson writes, "All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (*W* 1:23). Interacting with nature is not intended solely for simple viewing and appreciation but, sometimes, for personal inspiration to develop new creations or innovations that facilitate, for instance, faster and more accessible world travel. Wagenknecht wrote about Emerson's respect for applied sciences, asserting that in spite of his interest in "the spiritual aspects of science, there are times when he seems to relish technological power as much as it can be relished ..." (63).

Early in my professional life, I had the privilege of working in the aviation field which involved fixed winged aircraft and helicopters; oddly, I have always been fascinated by the spiritual energy present in most airports. Through the years, I've noticed that, in contrast to previous bi-plane designs, new innovations in contemporary aircraft designs increasingly have been informed by "the wings and forms of most birds," (*W* 1:16) and particularly by the natural flying capabilities they exhibit; The largest whale on earth, the blue whale, has recently inspired aeronautical engineers to engage in biomimicry research to conceptualize a three-story aircraft which can be assembled and flown using environmentally friendly material resources; for instance, the aircraft's form and technical capabilities reduces drag and fuel consumption during flight. It goes without mention that the animal kingdom's influences continue to inform our abilities for social wellbeing, including travel to new places. Interestingly, shortly after losing his young wife Helen to the ravages of tuberculosis, Emerson would embark upon a boat trip abroad to encounter various cultural sites and literary personalities in Europe and the United Kingdom; concluding his travel, and still mourning from his familial loses, he returned to New England with a new vision to write and publish, among other works, *Nature* in 1836.

## Conclusion

In *Nature*, Emerson initiates human empathy for our often misunderstood relationship with earth's ecological systems; the literary content is characteristically transcendentalist, philosophic, and not very "scientific" but it conveys a deeply human narrative about the meaning of life in our interdependent universe. Nature, its ecological systems, continue to inform our efforts to do good within our delicate planet in spite of our response rooted in self-interest. In contrast to ancient characterizations of a deity who vindictively demands that unworthy populations be dealt with through drought, pestilence, or war, Emerson instead describes a benevolent and reliable partner in the universe; our delicate but resilient ecological systems nourish our desire for beauty, encourages our willingness to partner with its work on bio-sustainability on earth, and informs our creative imagination to understand and replicate its dynamic beauty. Unfortunately, many our uses of much of the world's natural resources have not matched nature's cycles and influences and, instead, we have taken its aesthetic, spiritual, or intellectual forms for granted. Emerson, however, provides us hope but, un-naively, as well reminds us of our obligation to nature; he writes that nature continually stretches out "her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness" (*W* 1:21).

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