

EMERSON, AN ARTIST IN THE MEDIUM OF THEORY
by Robert A. McDermott

In the Introduction to his first essay, Nature (1837), Emerson asks, "Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?"(1) In a sense, all of Emerson's writings are in response to this rhetorical question. He emphatically states that man can and must relate to his world. In Emerson's terms, the world is Nature; the process whereby man relates to Nature is called experience. In order for an experience of Nature to be "original," it must break down the barriers which isolate man from his world. Ideally, man is continuous with Nature. Man would be able to realize this ideal union if he would satisfy "all the demands of the spirit."(2) That is to say, man cannot fully realize himself or his world until he embraces that aspect of human life which goes by the names of action, relation, process, creation. Spirit is the term Emerson uses to describe the processive element in the evolution of man and Nature. Man develops in and through Nature; Nature develops as a result of man's action upon it. Spirit is the moving force of this process; experience is its description.

When Emerson refers to Nature as processive, he is not alluding to a mere biological or physical process. Anticipating Darwin, Emerson asserts that matter evolves. But Emerson's doctrine of the fluidity of Nature is clearly independent of the struggle which results in the "survival of the fittest." The world is transformed through harmony: "Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode."(3)

In Emerson's theory of "relation," man is so inextricably bound to the universe that he cannot meaningfully function in isolation. Consequently, Emerson's fundamental question is too gentle: the contemporary question is not whether man can have an original relation to the universe, but rather, how he can relate to the universe in a way which is vital and creative. How can man's experience consistently yield the fruits which are collectively called his "own world"? Emerson's ultimate advice is for man to realize that the world is his to create. To quote his own words:

Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is

the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you. ---Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. (4)

Man has not worked out a viable relation with Nature. Modern man is cut off from Nature because "he applies to nature but half his force. He works on the whole with his understanding alone." (5) As compared with action, understanding is a less creative and therefore a relatively inadequate means of directing Nature. Both action and understanding are forms of experience, but it is action which enables man to realize his role in the development of reality. Far from being a detriment to man's intellectual endeavor, action is essential to the scholar: "Without it, thought can never ripen into truth." (6) Further, "the true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by (sic) as a loss of power. It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid production." (7)

In his conception of Nature and experience, Emerson not only shows that man shapes Nature, but, clearly anticipating Dewey, he asserts that Nature shapes man. Nature is as moral as it is creative. "Every natural process is a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pitch and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal preach to us." (8)

Experience is the term Emerson uses to describe the unity, the relatedness, of man and Nature. There are no loose ends in the creative process. Matter and spirit cohere; action and intelligence are aspects of the same experiential process. As Robert Pollock points out, man can only be "viewed in his relatedness, for he, above all, is 'a bundle of relations,' whose power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being. 'Our life,' he says, 'is consentaneous and far-related. This knot of nature is so well tied that nobody was ever cunning enough to find the two ends.'" (9)

It is a unique and powerful proposition which subordinates

thought to action. There is a tremendous philosophical distance between Cartesian man, *res cogitans*, and Emerson's man, who is in the same sense a *res conjungens*. For Descartes, thinking is a defining characteristic of man's essence. For Emerson, thinking is simply a function of man's experience. "The elemental force of living is a total act. Thinking is a partial act."(10) Action is essential even to the scholar, for "without it he is not yet man."(11) The scholar is the man who is most completely included, instructed and inspired by the work of Nature. "Time shall teach him that the scholar loses no hour which the man lives."(12)

To the contemporary American mind, Emerson's identification of knowledge and experience is not a radical notion. Emerson's insights have left a permanent deposit in the amalgum of American thought. It is precisely his view of Experience which, when more fully realized in James' Varieties of Religious Experience and Dewey's Art as Experience or Experience and Nature, distinguishes American Pragmatism from the other philosophical methods presently vying for our response.

That Emerson has made an inestimable contribution to philosophy is too evident a fact to belabor. That Emerson is a poet--i. e., an artist--is equally obvious. As a philosopher, his genius influenced James, Royce and Dewey; as a poet, he influenced Whitman. But it is not possible, nor should it be, to distinguish his poetry from his philosophy. Emerson's poetry is like James' philosophy in that he explores and celebrates "the dirt of private fact." Like Whitman's poetry, Emerson's philosophy is inconsistent: "I contradict myself? Alright, I contradict myself."

Emerson does not participate in the great philosophical debate. He indiscriminately draws upon the vast reserve of man's past experience. He neither rejects nor refutes philosophical systems which do not contribute to his over-all view. Santayana remarks that for Emerson philosophy "was rather a moral energy flowering into a sprightliness of thought than a body of serious and defensible doctrines."(13) It is understandable, then, that Emerson should equate Plato with philosophy: "His broad humanity transcends sectional lines, ---(and) this breadth entitles him to stand as the representative of philosophy."(14)

In a very real sense, Emerson's essay on Plato tells us

more about Emerson than about Plato. Statements such as the following perfectly describe Emerson's Plato and Emerson.

He is intellectual in his aim; and therefore, in expression, literary. (15)

He has not a system: ---the theory of the world is a thing of shreds and patches. (16)

All things are symbolical; and what we call results are beginnings. (17)

Finally, Emerson points out a quality which characterizes both Plato's work and his own.

The mind of Plato is not to be exhibited by a Chinese catalogue, but is to be apprehended by an original mind in the exercise of its original power. In him the freest abandonment is united with the precision of a geometer. His daring imagination gives him the more solid grasp of facts; as the birds of highest flight have the strongest alar bones. (18)

Insofar as Plato and Emerson attempted to grasp the facts which describe the human Odyssey, they anticipate those contemporary philosophers whose "daring imagination" describes man's total development and destiny. Emerson says that "Mysticism finds in Plato all its texts." (19) Pollock says of Emerson: "As one who had imbibed copiously of Plato's wisdom, he grasped the importance and even the sublimity of speculative thought." (20) Emerson as well as Plato was "an artist in the medium of theory." (21) Emerson's assertions are manifestly speculative because he is attempting to describe each man's philosophy. (Nothing is out of bounds -- "Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man?") (22) Every philosopher, in order to speak meaningfully about the world, must effect a unique or original relation to the universe; the expression of this relationship is the task of the imagination.

Consequently, it is woefully inaccurate to think of Emerson as a poet who was not systematic enough to be a philosopher. He is one of the profound thinkers, who, like many characteristic of our age, are attempting to describe the philosophical, poetic and religious dimensions of human life. Emerson, like contemporary philosophical anthropologists Berdyaev, Buber,

Niebuhr, Unamuno and Ortega, is vitally concerned with man's nature in terms of his social history and destiny.

Footnotes

1. "Nature" and "The American Scholar" contain the basic elements of Emerson's thought. Notes in this article refer to what is probably the best edition of Emerson: Selected Writings, ed. and introd. Brooks Atkinson; foreword, Tremaine McDowell (Modern Library College Edition). Equally valuable, however, as in introduction to the basic themes in Emerson's writings is the Dell edition: Emerson, A Modern Anthology, edd. Alfred Kazin and Daniel Aaron.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," Selected Writings (New York, The Modern Library, 1950), p. 41.
3. Ibid., p. 22.
4. Ibid., p. 42.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
6. "The American Scholar," p. 52.
7. Ibid., p. 53.
8. "Nature," p. 23.
9. Robert C. Pollock, "A Reappraisal of Emerson," Thought, XXXII, Spring, 1957, 108; this essay is also included in American Classics Reconsidered, ed. Harold C. Gardiner. (Pollock's study is by far the best analysis of Emerson I have read; it is an invaluable aid to an understanding of Emerson's philosophy.)
10. "The American Scholar," p. 54.
11. Ibid., p. 52.
12. Ibid., p. 55.
13. George Santayana, "Emerson," Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1957), p. 223.
14. Emerson, "Plato; or, the Philosopher," p. 473.
15. Ibid., p. 490.
16. Ibid., p. 491.
17. Ibid., p. 486.
18. Ibid., p. 480.
19. Ibid., p. 472.
20. Pollock, p. 88.
21. Ibid.
22. "Nature," p. 35. (The "infinitude" of man's experience is the thesis of James' Varieties of Religious Experience.)