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52 Emerson In Contemporary Thought

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The influence of the philosophies and literature of those thinkers who are considered to be on the side of the freedom and individuality is often limited to the well-turned phrases which defends personal interests. For example, it is the negative aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy—that Nietzsche who topples the traditional idols whom our generation heralds as the font of contemporary thought—that is the delight of the students/contemporary Existentialists' need to choose freedom and their desire to be cut off from all exterior forces is often traced to Nietzsche's philosophy. However, Nietzsche's philosophy is surely more than a mere affirmation of individual freedom or an attack on traditional values.

The way in which Nietzsche has been used to defend doctrines alien to his own is relevant to our consideration of Emerson. Emerson is a thinker who is likewise quoted to support clearly-contrary attitudes. Like Nietzsche, Emerson is quoted and referred to, but seldom read carefully. A random collection of quotes from Emerson's works can show him to be anything from a Platonist to a radical individualist. For example, Emerson states that "the mind suffers no religion and no empire but its own." Similarly, Nietzsche writes that the creator is he "who breaks the table of values." These two statements are among countless others which could be cited to prove that Nietzsche's and Emerson's philosophy is one of negation. Yet just the opposite is true; they are both affirmative. It is precisely because

they believe it is possible for man to create genuine values that they so vehemently attack the institutions and traditions which have impeded man's progress.

While our primary concern here is the thought of Emerson, Nietzsche has been discussed because the two are thinkers of the past century whose concerns have found their way into the two major traditions which claim our allegiance today. Neither existentialism nor pragmatism can be traced to any one source, nor can they be said to claim our commitment. However, the problems of meaning and integrity are prevalent and responses to them reveal world views which are fundamentally at odds with each other. Emerson and the American tradition for which he speaks are evidence enough that no one tradition has a franchise as the sole critic of our culture; his philosophy is proof that the alternatives of existentialism are not the only ones possible.

Emerson is no more a twentieth century thinker than Nietzsche or Kierkegaard. Both his categories and the context of his thought are manifestly last-century. Emerson's view of man was not influenced by two world wars and virtually fifty years of hatred. He didn't anticipate the problem of "anxiety" nor the prevalence of "bad faith." Nevertheless, he raises questions and grapples with problems which are critical in our generation. In spite of his generally optimistic view, Emerson well knew man's weakness and frankly admitted that "there is a crack in everything God made." John Jay Chapman accurately placed Em-

erson in his historical setting when he explained that Emerson's "works are all one single attack on the vice of the age, moral cowardice."

Emerson bitterly attacked his contemporaries' sheepishness. But he did not simply criticize and scourge them; he showed them the unfortunate results of their timidity and gave them a "why and how" to rectify their failing. Herein lies the difference between the Sartrean and the Emersonian views. As one interpreter has noted, Emerson insists that "man cannot pursue his creative task without taking the universe into himself, as something meaningful and lovable." Man's task, then, is to participate in the world, so that by means of the harmony he effects he can share in its secrets and symbolic truths. This same critic concludes that nature is the "indispensable medium of intellectual and spiritual discernment."

When Emerson says that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind," he means that the insights communicated to the individual by Nature are inviolable. This doctrine is characteristic of American philosophy. It was first proposed by Emerson in 1836, and finds the culmination of its expression in John Dewey's thesis that experience is directive or pedagogical; participation in the world is a learning process. (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 95-96).

Emerson's thought is deeply rooted in the American past; it is the first articulate expression of the doctrines which have ever

since characterized the American tradition. This fact makes all the more astounding and lamentable the lack of affinity our generation feels for Emerson. While he is kindly referred to as our national sage, he is scarcely studied or accepted as a thinker of great and permanent stature. Yet, a serious reading of his most important essays, *Nature*, *The American Scholar* and *Self-Reliance*, will reveal a thinker who handles problems of staggering proportions. His vision transcends the limits of place and time. For example, could he be speaking to another age more than ours when he states: "In self-truth all the virtues are comprehended." Or, "The world is nothing, the man is all; . . . it is for you to know all; it is for you to dare all." These are among the exhortations which Emerson delivered to the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837. Little wonder that Oliver Wendell Holmes called this address (*The American Scholar*) "Our intellectual Declaration of Independence." The essays *Nature*, 1836, and *Self-Reliance*, 1841, are equally unequivocal in their insistence that man must accept the responsibility of affirming his own values. Emerson demands that we reopen man's experiential pores and ultimately extend his sensitivity and consciousness, thus enlarging his vision of the world.

The broadening of man's experience is for Emerson the broadening of man's ability to evaluate and direct a program for his future. As Emerson believed that "man's thought spring from his actions rather than his actions

from his thoughts." The cohesion of ideation and action is a doctrine as basic to Emerson's thought as it has been to American philosophy. It asserts that the hope of justice rests in man's ability to transform "genius into practical power."

Emerson offers no definite approach to the reconstruction of society—this task has to wait for Dewey; he does, however, offer so extensive and effective a program for the reconstruction of the individual that the transformation of society would be the immediate by-product. The role of the individual is clear: "With each new mind a new secret transpires." Every new mind has a voice, and every "secret" deserves a hearing. Every idea deserves to be tried, for "an action is the perfection and publication of thought." The universe is "fluid" and man has the power to channel it as he wills. When he chooses a new course he assumes the responsibility of his risk. The responsibility is often burdensome and the reward is not always relieving. Yet some men choose; these are the creators.

Emerson says that "each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding." Our generation seems to have welcomed Nausea; might it not also welcome a second Nature? Our age has perused the challenge offered in *The American Scholar*; might it not also meet the challenge offered in *The American Scholar*; might it not also meet that challenge? The age is ours, and so is the task.