

# EMERSON'S CHANGING VIEW OF NATURE AND HIS ERA

by

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With regard to Emerson's view of nature, many Emerson scholars seem to base their interpretations solely on his little book *Nature*, published in 1836. But as a matter of fact, Emerson is as inconsistent in his attitude toward nature as he is in his theory of transcendentalism. The ideas about nature as expressed in his later essays, such as the second "Nature," "The Method of Nature," "Experience," and "Fate," are found not just inconsistent but even sometimes contradictory to the view presented in his first book *Nature*.

However, after examining these essays and other related writings in the context of their times, we find that Emerson's changing view of nature is closely related to the thought movements and social conditions of his age, which might be approximately divided into three periods, with each period showing a striking difference from the other two. At the beginning, *Nature* is chiefly concerned with the illumination of nature and his transcendental ideas, but in the second period, very much influenced by the science of that time, Emerson's interest shifts to the idea of nature's evolution. Either stricken by the grief over the death of his son Waldo or disillusioned by the actuality of his time, in the third period Emerson declares the more realistic side of nature's limitations.

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As Douglas T. Miller in his recent book wrote, "Between the first decades of the nineteenth century and the years of Andrew Jackson's presidency, America changed from a traditional, pre-industrial society that was slow to accept innovations, to a modern capitalistic state in which people believed that society could be transformed."<sup>1</sup> During this period, the American social transformation was not confined to the changing of the face of the nation with its manufacturing cities, its canals and railroads. Modes of thought in philosophy and religion also underwent a drastic change. Take religion for instance; by the time of the American Revolution, Calvinism had so weakened its traditional tenets that Christian theology tended to converge with natural religion. When in 1786 the proprietors of King's Chapel in Boston voted to drop all reference to the Trinity from the Book of Common Prayer, they created the first Unitarian church in America and freed mercantile respectability from both the fear of hell-fire and the unseemly doctrine of inherited depravity. The relation among God, man, and the universe in Unitarian circles was for a time a relation as plain and rational as the psychology of John Locke. But the difficulty in a plain and rational religion lies in the lack of "the somber tragedy of Calvin and the mystical rapture of Edwards."<sup>2</sup> In the phrase of Harvey Townsend heaven and earth had now been sundered, and the great question in men's minds was how they could be brought together again. One of the aims of Emerson's *Nature* is obviously to bridge the gap between this heaven and earth.

<sup>1</sup> Douglas T. Miller, *The Birth of Modern America, 1820-1850* (New York, 1970), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Mumford Jones, "Transcendentalism and Emerson" in *Belief and Disbelief in American Literature* (Chicago, 1967), p. 52.

Although industrial progress and mechanical innovations brought economic prosperity and material success, people of that period felt that the harmonious relationship between man and nature had been broken, and so had been the old ways and values. Of course, Emerson felt the same way. And what made him very uneasy with the growing industrialism was the unpleasing change that it had brought to the face and character of his country. Emerson expressed a marked preference for an agrarian order. In his early lectures he analyzed the psychological effects of the social forces of his era. In "The Present Age," he wrote:

We have lost all reverence for the state. It is merely our boarding house. We have lost all reverence for the Church; it is also republican. We call a spade, a spade. We have great contempt for the superstitions and nonsense which blinded the eyes of all foregoing generations. But we pay a great price for this freedom. The old faith is gone; the new loiters on the way. The world looks very bare and cold. We have lost our Hope.... Out of this measuring and decorum and prudence what refreshment can ever issue?<sup>3</sup>

Emerson saw the degree to which his society had managed to "demythify" life, as political and religious entities became mere associations, and the breaking of taboos left things simply as *things*. Emerson also saw that "A thousand religions" were in arms, and systems of education were contesting. Every thoughtful young man was then besieged by a chaos of doubts. Should he read or think? Should he choose solitude or active life? The wise could give no answer. From the vast amount of matter what should he read—history (what has been) or morals (what ought to be)? No one could give the resolving word. It was under circumstances like these

<sup>3</sup> *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. II, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert Spiller, and Wallace Williams (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 169.

that Emerson wrote his little book *Nature*.

After Emerson gave up the ministry of the gospel in 1832, "he found himself looking earnestly for some other serious field to cultivate, some other subject on which he could preach without the hampering restrictions to which he had been subject in the church."<sup>4</sup> And what he found was of course "nature." As we generally understand, both in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries there was a close connection between the concept of nature and the general movement of American thought of each period. The eighteenth century studied nature and man in order to establish "their relationships as parts of an intricate machine in which they were locked in mutual interdependency." The eighteenth century looked at nature with an intellectual appreciation of its order and perfection. Looking at man, it found him to be a creature of both reason and passion, yet it recognized too that "his emotional nature was compatible with his reason and could be controlled by it."<sup>5</sup>

The nineteenth century's response to nature and man was different in both degree and kind. The thinkers of the nineteenth century studied the inner side of humanity and found there, as others had before, both reason and passion. But the Romantic Age stressed the emotional aspects of man's nature until they became a higher source of truth than reason. So nature to the nineteenth century became less important for itself and more so for the impact it had on man, "important chiefly insofar as men perceived and used it with their inner senses."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Warren Beach, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry* (New York, 1954), p. 318.

<sup>5</sup> Russell B. Nye, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830* (New York, 1960), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

However, after the Industrial Revolution, America became "a technologically oriented society. 'The society prefigured by the myth of the Garden,' wrote Leo Marx, 'would celebrate a passive accommodation to nature's law. There, survival would depend upon the organic production of growth. But, on the other hand, the machine foretold an economy designed by man's brain, and it implies an active, indeed proud, assertion of his dominion over nature.'"<sup>7</sup>

As a great thinker not only of his own age (1803-1882) but of one of the most distinguished and most influential of all American authors, Emerson had certainly expressed himself best in his study of nature before he could possibly engage his thoughts on anything else. Either religiously, or philosophically, or moralistically, he felt the urge that nature—the world of phenomena surveyed by science—needs a right kind of interpretation in his era. On the moral level, he proposed in *Nature* that man ought to "enjoy an original relation to the universe (W, I, p. 3),"<sup>8</sup> one of individual insight rather than tradition. He defined the lover of nature as "he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other (W, I, p. 9)." Man is taught, he pointed out, "by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it (W, I, p. 20)," and "A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text (W, I, p. 35)."

"A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol," Emerson wrote, "and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon

<sup>7</sup> *The Birth of Modern America, 1820-1850*, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York, 1903), Vol. I, p. 3. To avoid innumerable notes I shall cite hereafter my major source in parentheses within the text.

his love of truth and his desire to communicate it without loss. The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of idea is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires—the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise—and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old works are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time the fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections. Hundreds of writers may be found in every long-civilized nation who for a short time believe and make others believe that they see and utter truth, who do not of themselves clothe one thought in its natural garment, but who feed unconsciously on the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily on nature (W, I, pp. 29-30).” “The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him,” he believed, and “Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world (W, I, p. 43).”

The whole existence of *Nature* is to define “an original relation to the universe.” Yet before he could disclose what he meant by an original relation to the universe, Emerson had to answer a more immediate question—the philosophical question of the nature of nature—since the universe is nature, and no one can have any relation to a thing he does not understand.

Was nature substantial and fixed or insubstantial and illusory? Was the materialist right in believing all visible and touchable things to be what he saw them to be? Or was the philosophical idealist right in maintaining that although there were things around man

constituting what he called nature, it was impossible to know them, their qualities of shape, color, and behavior all arbitrarily created and ascribed to them by mind?

Emerson's position embraced both materialism and philosophical idealism; nature was both fact and idea, both thing and mind. The roses, the pine trees, the redbirds, the rivers, the mountains, the clouds--all these were what they appeared to be, and to mingle one's existence with theirs was one of the most precious pursuits of his life. "I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it. I expand 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 (W, I, p. 59)."

The elements of nature were symbols. In their physicality they offered beauty to man and were of use in many ways; in what underlay their physicality they reflected something of the divine intelligence, the Universal Mind, which had created all things, which *was* all things. Thus they had a double reality—one evidenced by man's senses and another, higher by far, affirmable only by his mind. For Emerson everything that the eye beholds was an objectification of thought.

Obviously, Emerson's inquiry into the meaning and purpose of nature is at bottom an effort to assimilate nature into himself, to reduce the NOT ME to the ME. Here Emerson had gone one step further than the English Romantics, for they only intend to link the bridge of ME and NOT ME. How did Emerson do this? First, Emerson assigned five kinds of functions to nature. As has just been described, nature existed for five uses: as commodity, beauty, language, discipline, and finally, ideal symbol. He asserted the primacy of Ideas.

Then, by means of the Idea Theory, Emerson led us to regard nature as phenomenon, not substance:

Whilst we acquiesce entirely in the permanence of natural laws, the question of the absolute existence of nature still remains open. It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomenon, as of heat, water, azote; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect (W, I, p. 49).

By attributing nature's necessary existence to spirit and by esteeming nature as accident and an effect, Emerson brought nature within the sphere of the self; man was finally cut off from the belief in any reality external to him.

However, Emerson knew that to affirm the lack of a reality outside was only half the truth, unless reality was to be discovered inside; so he moved from idealism to spiritualism. Thus, by giving himself over to the intuitive features of the portion of that intelligence which he embodied, man could unite with the inarticulate spirit pulsating within the attractive phenomena of nature all about him. His mind, spiritualized by this extraordinary identification, would see the underlying significance of nature's lovely and useful constituents and attain a larger knowledge of itself and of the universe. Nature was "the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead the individual back to it." Like the vast sky this Universal Spirit, or soul, was forever arching in benevolence over him; and like the air, of which the sky was made, it was ready to flow into him in as deep drafts as he could take. Emerson described briefly his own transformation in such moments: "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me..." (W, I, p. 10)."

It was this experience, then, which was in Emerson's



mind at the very outset of the little work when he propounded the memorable question, "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" As Warren Staebler wrote in his recent book on Emerson, the value of such a relation was immeasurable:

It was original, first, in putting man in direct connection with the origin of all life, the primal source of being. It was original also in that its effect was on the original part of man: he was mind before he was body, spirit before he was flesh. It was original additionally in involving man in adoration, a state of mind which, in the history of the race, preceded skepticism. It was original finally because its consequence was to make each man an original creature, a unique person, an individual.<sup>9</sup>

Religiously speaking, what is so remarkable about Emerson's insistence on a relation between man and the divine responsible for the universe, its operation as well as creation? Have not all Christian churches for generations been equally insistent on the same thing? The answer is that what Christian churches have been preaching is not what Emerson was advocating; the difference lies in the meaning of "relation."

Traditionally, Christianity has propagated a faith based on dualism—that is, on the fact of man and God as two separate beings, living in the two disparate worlds, one low and one high, capable of being close to each other but never of union. Man has always been in a relation to God, being the creature of a creator, but in prayer or worship although he could never become one with Him. In profound and humble meditation, man "down here," could solicit and win the ear of God, "up there," and sometimes believe that his petition was being heeded. This was generally the sum of his relation. For Emerson man and God were not thus separate, God was not a person; nor was he a being.

<sup>9</sup> Warren Staebler, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1973), p. 89.

God was being in its highest and most intelligential form, therefore divine. But the divine was not "up there" in contrast to the mortal "down here." The divine was everywhere, already in small part within man himself and every moment all about him. In right worship man opened himself to the currents of divinity surrounding him so that the small portion of it already his became larger. The relation, then, which Emerson urged his readers to seek was not simply relation; it was identification. Worship was communion, man becoming one with God. In communion, man saw with the eyes of God and thereby experienced exaltation. No wonder he defined prayer as he did, seeing it always as rejoicing rather than selfish petition:

Prayer that craves a particular commodity, anything less than all good, is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means of effecting a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness (W, II, p. 77).

As has been shown, the book *Nature* was intended to be read moralistically, philosophically, and religiously so as to meet the needs of all levels in Emerson's era. However, *Nature* reveals not just Emerson's attitude toward nature, but more importantly, it advanced the main Transcendentalist tenets. These tenets, after we have a full discussion of the whole book and its main ideas, can be summarized as follows:

1. That God reveals himself everywhere and at all times, here and now; that historical Christianity, with its reliance on a biblical record of occasional revelations to ancient prophets, is no longer true now.
2. That Nature is the revelation of God and the manifestation of spirit.
3. That Reason, a higher faculty than the understanding, is the faculty by which man directly beholds spirit in nature.

4. That Reason's communion with nature as spirit, transcending the understanding's exploitation of nature as commodity, can redeem man by animating his spiritual affinities; that the ritual of priests and churches cannot induct an inner soul into spiritual life.

## (2)

For the first period, any understanding of Emerson's response to nature must begin with his religious attitude, which was central to all his thought during this early period. But there were other things behind the whole religious attitude toward nature, which should also be noticed here. In the first place, the whole matter, such as ideas about the illumination, correspondences, and the benevolent tendency of nature, is not only Emerson's response to his age but also his triumph over his own inner conflicts. As Stephen E. Whicher has brilliantly shown, "After rejecting Christianity in all its forms, and seeing at the same time the indifferent world of reality, Emerson could do nothing but appeal to nature for aid, interpreting it as the embodiment of his transcendentalism and the replacement of Scripture as a revelation of our duty and an encouragement to moral effort."<sup>10</sup> As Emerson himself proclaimed, in a well-known passage of *Nature*, "All things are moral; and... hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments (W, I, pp. 40-41)." Perhaps this moral consciousness is one of the reasons for Emerson's being often criticized as an optimist who knows no evil. Secondly, idealistic and spiritualistic as Emerson was, he still had not entirely neglected the factual world. As he said, in another place of *Nature*:

There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1961), p. 59.

bird, acid and alkali, preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit. A *fact* is the end or the last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumstance of the invisible world (W, I, pp. 34-35).

When we come to the second period—the nature of evolution, we find that with his changed attitude toward nature, Emerson now paid more attention to facts, and the general tone of those essays, such as “The Method of Nature” and “Nature” in the Second Series, were factual and down-to-earth. This changed attitude partly grew up with Emerson’s consciousness of the magnificent side of American commercial and industrial enterprise and the dramatic implications of a continent unsubdued, and partly was influenced by his readings on the history of natural science.

While Emerson felt that the old values and ways had been breaking and religious entities had become mere associations, he was not only a Christian but also an American. As an American, Emerson felt that the experiment made by America, of men governing themselves, would not fail through “too much knowledge and too much liberty.” He loved the freedom of opinion and action to be found in America, its equality of opportunity and celebrated it as

the only land where freedom has not degenerated to licentiousness; in whose rich estates peacefully descend from private violence or public tyranny; whose offices of trust and seats of science are filled by minds of republican strength and elegant accomplishments (J, I, pp. 161-162).<sup>11</sup>

Emerson saw that if the Constitution survived a century, it would be a wonderful omen to the human race, for “it would mean that utopian dreams had been outdone by reality.”<sup>12</sup> It also meant that “the reformation of

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Staebler, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the world would be to be expected from America (J, I, p. 248).” Gradually, he took increasing pleasure in what seemed evidence of nature’s “progressive adaptation to human wants.”

“By temperament, inclination, and circumstance,” as Daniel Aaron observed, “Emerson belonged to a class out of sympathy with the rising industrial *bourgeoisie*, but he was extremely sensitive to the currents of his age and deeply infected by its omnipresent materialism.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, even though he was ostensibly preoccupied with non-utilitarian ends, Emerson showed deep interest in the practical performances of men and their mundane accomplishments. In essays like “Power” and “Wealth,” he showed his preference for the “bruisers” and “pirates,” the “men of the right Caesarian pattern” who transcended the pettiness of “talkers” and “clerks” and dominated the world by sheer force of character. “Life is a search after power (W, VI, p. 53),” he announced, and the successful men understood the laws of Nature and responded to the Godhead within themselves and converted “the sap and juices of the planet to the incarnation and nutriment of their design (W, VI, p. 74).”

In these essays and elsewhere, Emerson clearly affirmed his strong democratic attachments to and humanitarian sympathies with the American commercial and industrial enterprise. He fully understood that any attempt to check the capitalistic incentives was a futile and unjustifiable interference with the iron laws of circumstance:

Wealth brings with it its own checks and balances. The basis of political economy is non-interference. The only safe role is found in the self-adjusting meter of demand and supply. Do

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Aaron, “Emerson and the Progressive Tradition” in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 92.

not legislate. Meddle, and you snap the sinews with your sumptuary laws. Give no bounties, make equal laws, secure life and property, and you need not give alms. Open the doors of opportunity to talent and virtue and they will not be in bad hands. In a free and just commonwealth, property rushes from the idle and imbecile to the industrious, brave and preserving (W, VI, pp. 105-106).

Ideas of the competitive enterprise and progressive nature were both explicitly and implicitly expressed in Emerson's changed view of nature of the second period.

Emerson's interest in natural science, according to Joseph Warren Beach, was greatly stimulated by his visit, in 1833, to the Museum of *the Jardin des Plantes* in Paris. Here he found before his eyes the several animal forms graded from lowest to highest in the scale. How much he had been impressed was shown by his entry in his Journal:

The universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms, —the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient, in the very rock aping organized forms. Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer, — an occult relation between the very scorpions and men. I feel the centipede in me, —caymen, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies; I say continually, "I will be a naturalist."<sup>14</sup>

It was with this new interest in natural science and the idea of evolution that Emerson was directly urged to write his essays like "Nature" and "The Method of Nature."

It was this enlarged conception of nature that did most to throw his spiritualistic transcendentalism into a new perspective. And Emerson has now apparently moved from a subjective idealism toward an objective evolution. Originally, he could think of Soul as within

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Beach, p. 318.

the self and that nature was, in a transcendental sense, the externalization of this aboriginal Self and the creation of man. But now he would rather think that the Soul was within nature and man was but her late product. As Stephen E. Whicher puts it, "As a part of nature, man shared in the Soul; as the only conscious part of nature, he even had the special privilege to see and know the Soul within him; but he was no longer prior to or apart from the world around him."<sup>15</sup> As has been indicated, the cause of this shift was not so much the collapse of his dream of Self-reliance, as it was the entrance into his thought of a new way of conceiving nature, the general idea of evolution.

However, in dealing with Emerson we must understand the term *evolution* very loosely. In his study of "Emerson and Evolution," Beach has pointed out that Emerson's early idea of "evolution" was nothing more "scientific" than the general idea of some "progressive system in nature": "Striving to be man, the worm" did not necessarily pass through any chronological sequence of evolution. Emerson's early idea was essentially the old Platonic concept of the "Great Chain of Being," which asserted that some scale of being existed, within which all the forms of creation were related.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Emerson later did gradually approach a genuinely evolutionary view after 1850 he more nearly approximated the scientific formulation of the idea, although he never mentioned Darwin and never interested himself in the scientific facts or observations which Darwin and others adduced to prove the theory. "Always the ideas or laws of science interested him personally, but the methods and facts of scientific investigation

<sup>15</sup> *Freedom and Fate*, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> See Joseph W. Beach, "Emerson and Evolution," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, III (1934), 474-497.

hardly at all."<sup>17</sup>

Emerson did not come to the thought of evolution all at once. But once the idea of evolution was adopted by him, it also had an effect of a deeper sort—to reinforce his sense of the universal flux of things, and at the same time of the pervasiveness of law. At the time of *Nature*, though he spoke of nature's floods of life, his conception of nature was static and material. Nature was the last issue of spirit. As Emerson expressed it, "In the divine order, intellect is primary; nature, secondary; it is the memory of the mind. That which once existed in intellect as pure law, has now taken body as Nature."<sup>18</sup> Spirit was then embodied in an infinite variety of forms, whose unity in variety conspicuously illustrated nature's submission to laws. But there was no implication that there was metamorphosis among these forms, and the basic characteristic of nature remained her materiality.

Evolution almost literally dissolved this conception of nature. Both form and matter lost their final character and began now to flow. At the heart of nature, where before he had seen a matter opposed to life, he now saw vitality and change. But this dissolution of the present order of nature only strengthened his belief in her governing laws. With the loss of other stability, these became the only principle of performance left. And nature's diversity was now lost in the all-inclusive unity of the idea of progressive development. This sense of an incessant flux in nature, and yet of a guiding identity behind it, was the most conspicuous theme of "The Method of Nature" and of the second essay "Nature," and was the real point of the passage from "Poetry and Imagination" quoted by Joseph W. Beach

<sup>17</sup> Frederic I. Carpenter, *Emerson Handbook* (New York, 1967), p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York, 1970), p. 53.



as the sum of Emerson's philosophy of nature of this period.

First innuendoes, then broad hints, then smart taps are given, suggesting that nothing stands still in Nature but death; that the creation is on wheels, in transit, always passing into something else, streaming into something higher; that matter is not what it appears.... Thin or solid, everything is in flight... and nothing fast but those invisible cords which we call laws, on which all is strung...the secret cords or laws show their well-known virtue through every variety, be it animal, or plant, or planet....<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps too much attention has been paid in discussions of Emerson's idea of evolution to the narrow question of the time-relation of the species. Emerson's change in his thought of nature was also caused by his reading in geology. As Beach pointed out, Sir Charles Lyell was then an internationally known geologist and his book *The Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) was well accepted. "He [Emerson] read Lyell about 1836, and about that time a new note slipped into his forest thoughts."<sup>20</sup> A sense of the undreamed-of immensity and brute violence of the processes of nature also grew up in his imagination. As he wrote in his Journals:

"Miracles have ceased." Have they indeed? ...Tell me, good friend, when this hillock on which your foot stands swelled from the level of the sphere by volcanic force; pick up that pebble at your foot; look at its gray sides, its sharp crystal, and tell me what fiery inundation of the world melted the minerals like wax, and, as if the globe were one glowing crucible, gave this stone its shape.... Why cannot geology, why cannot botany speak and tell me what has been, what is, as I run along the forest promontory, and ask when it rose like a blister on heated steel?<sup>21</sup>

The familiar nature of his earlier period became

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Beach in *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*, p. 341.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Whicher in *Freedom and Fate*, p. 145.

now something much vaster and stranger. The affinity to his own mind of the forces that had controlled nature seemed suddenly less obvious. And above all the effect of his reading in geology was to open up for him a perspective into the secular quality of nature and the infinite time of man's actual evolution:

Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature, and taught us to disuse our dame-school measure, and exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her large style. We knew what patient periods must round themselves before the rock is formed; then before the rock is broken, and the first lichen race has disintegrated the thinnest external plate into soil, and opened the door for the remote Lora, Fauna, Cere, and Pomona to come in. How far off yet is the trilobite! how far the quadruped! how inconceivably remote is man! (W, III, pp. 179-180)

In the light of the nature revealed by geology Emerson's egocentric transcendentalism appears somewhat ridiculous and incomprehensible, for nature is now too vast, too long-lived, too powerful and too alien to be subordinated to the mere individual. This changed attitude lies behind the distinction between *nature passive* and *nature efficient* that Emerson made in his second essay "Nature." Passive Nature was the familiar nature of the senses, the woods and the fields, while Efficient Nature stood now in the place formerly occupied in *Nature* by "Spirit" and seemed indistinguishable from God. It is "Efficient Nature, the quick cause before which all forms flee as the driven snows; itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, . . . and in undescrivable variety (W, III, p. 179)." The rest of the essay discusses a nature which has become another name for the Cause.

A faith in Efficient Nature, however, acted as an alternative for Emerson's first faith in the humanity of the Soul. Nature was the NOT ME, and her worship threatened to subject him to a power alien to himself.

He preferred now to worship Reality directly, in its own name. That his faith in nature could only occasionally satisfy his religious impulses was further demonstrated by the address on "The Method of Nature."

"The Method of Nature" was delivered before the Society of the Adelpi in Waterville College, Maine, in 1841. This address should be regarded as crucial as the 1836 *Nature* if we intend to have a clear understanding of Emerson's views of nature. The address, to be sure, is one of his most inconsistent writings. The root of the trouble seems to be that the address represents an incomplete stage in his assimilation of his new conception of nature. In this address, Emerson still tried to derive the old anthropocentric lessons of *Nature* from his new nature of flux and evolution. Yet the new vision of flowing nature, as Perry Miller has suggested, lifts him to the unusual peak of faith. Also, as Stephen E. Whicher has pointed out, Emerson's consciousness of the unseizable flux of nature serves to heighten his sense of the metaphysical spring of her vitality. We are unable, Emerson argued, to read the secret of nature because she is not to be understood by intellect. Nature has no particular cause, no particular end. She has her cause in her own boundless life, and her end is ecstasy. Ever-renewed nature, felt as a whole, speaks of an overflowing principle of Life as her cause which is not to be known but can be felt and loved.

How silent, how spacious, what room for all, yet without place to insert an atom; —in graceful succession, in equal fulness, in balanced beauty, the dance of the hours goes forward still. Like inexact and boundless. It will not be dissected, nor unravelled, nor shown. Away, profane philosopher! seekest thou in nature the cause? This refers to that, and that to the next, and the next to the third, and everything refers. Thou must ask in another mood, thou must feel it and love it, thou must behold it in a spirit as grand as that by which it

exists, ere thou canst know the law. Known it will not be,  
but gladly beloved and enjoyed.<sup>22</sup>

In this mood of exalted confidence, Emerson transcended the barrier of the new flux of nature put in the path of his old faith. Nature was not to be understood; she was a ceaseless flow of life, an immortal energy. Faith was an ecstasy in which man immersed himself in this stream of life. "Newly aware of the vastness of the spending of things, not yet settled in the consciousness of his human limitations, Emerson responded with a powerful sense of release to the idea of a possible union *by love alone* to the currents of being."<sup>23</sup> This, perhaps, is the secret of freedom—to break away from endless speculations, abandon all philosophy, and approach the throne through the heart. Here Emerson seemed to go over to the anti-intellectual side. Here Emerson has obviously contradicted his early idea of the intellectual conquest of nature.

(3)

With the appearance of the essays "Experience" and "Fate," all the early emphasis on nature's benevolence was heard no more. In "Experience" even the tone of the first sentence—"Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none (W, III, p. 45)."—sounds remarkably different from either the book *Nature* or the second essay "Nature." Man seems now in a lost condition: He himself cannot find his way of life, nor can nature find his way for him. In *Nature*, Emerson's section on "Discipline" suggested that daily experiences of nature might contribute to the illumination of the mind. And this illumination led to "Idealism" in

<sup>22</sup> *The American Transcendentalists*, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup> *Freedom and Fate*, p. 148.

philosophy, and to a religion of "Spiritualism." But five of the seven "lords of life" in "Experience" are conditions which make the inspiration of the Divine Soul impossible, even though Emerson stops again and again to point out that the limitations of experience he is describing do not affect his faith in the Soul.

Whether or not Emerson had ever admitted that he was a skeptic in his old age, one of his best essays—"Experience"—was certainly written by a hand of a skeptic. The problem now is not that of how nature can be intellectually understood and conquered, or how nature can be intuitively felt and loved, but it is now that of how man should deal with the "sinning" nature. As the new Emerson sees, "Nature... is no saint.... She comes eating and drinking and sinning (W, III, p. 64)." And "the world is all outside; it has no inside (W, III, p. 75)." By this time Emerson's faith in man's possibilities has lost all its power to save him from falling into skepticism. The only wisdom left to Emerson is merely a skeptic's downright practical wisdom. Since "nature, art, letters, religions, objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of our ideas (W, III, p. 76)," the only thing that man may rely on is his own life in this world. By now, man's position in the world has also almost dwindled into insignificance. The condition of man is cut from the real and "soul never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at, and converse with (W, III, p. 48)."

The skeptic's view of the soul of man is ridiculously far from the grand egoism of the transcendentalist. "We cannot give ourselves too many advantages in this unequal conflict, with powers so vast and unwearable ranged on one side, and this little conceited vulnerable popinjay that a man is, bobbing up and down into every danger, on the other (W, III, p. 72)." For the potential

God, "open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature (W, III, p. 81)," he substitutes a neutral personality open, as it were, on all sides, adrift on the stream of time and circumstance, and oriented only by certain landmarks which in "Experience" Emerson called, as has been mentioned above, "the lords of life." These he could not explain, but only observe and reconcile as he might. To call the roll of these guardians was as close as the skeptic could come to a philosophy of life. The ethics of the skeptic are based on life, not life as it ought to be, but as it is. His first injunction is "Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere (W, III, p. 48)." He recognizes the permanent limitations of human nature. "Human life is made up of the two elements, power and form, and the proportion must be invariably kept if we would have it sweet and sound. Each of these elements in excess makes a mischief as hurtful as its defect (W, III, p. 65)." Since the world is governed so largely by illusion, "we live only amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them (W, III, p. 59)." The skeptic also sets aside the impossible effort to live above time. "Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. Five minutes in the next millennium.... Men live in their fancy, like drunkards whose hands are too soft and tremulous for successful labor. It is a tempest of fancies, and the only ballast I know is a respect to the present hour (W, III, p. 60)." The only reality that men can achieve lies in honestly living out each moment as it comes. "To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours (W, III, p. 60)" is the wisdom of the skeptic.

The skeptic also sees clearly the distinction between natural freedom and moral perfection and unhesitatingly chooses freedom. Our duty is fulfilled if we do broad

justice wherever we can. To postpone and refer and wish in the hope of a supernal perfection is to lose freedom altogether. "Nature, as we know her, is no saint.... Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law; do not come out of the Sunday School, nor weigh their food, not punctually keep the commandments (W, III, p. 64)." In the same spirit he accepts his individual genius. Thought, literature are no grand things, but they are what he was born to do. Let him obey his bias and fill the hour. "Life itself is a bubble and a scepticism, and a sleep within a sleep. Grant it, and as much more as they will, —but thou, God's darling! heed thy private dream ...know that thy life is a fitting state (W, III, p. 65)." This is still self-reliance—but now a naturalistic self-reliance without the transcendentalism, based not on faith but on experience.

After undergoing such a period of skepticism, Emerson might have come to the realization that the benevolent tendency of nature is but the illusion of human mind. At the same time, as F. I. Carpenter has shown, Emerson in his later years was much influenced by his readings in Oriental, particularly Buddhist, literature. In this sense, Emerson's Oriental reading, which did not shape his transcendentalism, now helps him to express his dismay at the "stunning non-intercourse law" that cuts men off from the world, from other men, and from the underlying Reality. So the idea of natural evil might have already become deep-rooted in his mind when he wrote "Fate," for even before the writing of this essay in 1860, we find a kind of peculiarly Emersonian tragic sense emerges most clearly in some of his poems. In "Days," for example, he reveals a lingering sense of obscure guilt at the contrast between his morning wishes and the few herbs and apples that must be his lot:

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,  
 Muffled and dumblike barefoot dervishes,  
 And marching single in an endless file,  
 Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.  
 To each they offer gifts after his will,  
 Bread, kingdoms, stars, and sky that holds them all.  
 I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,  
 Forgot my morning wishes, hastily  
 Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day  
 Turned and departed silent. I, too late,  
 Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.<sup>24</sup>

This poem also shows Emerson's elegiac recognition that our life perpetually promises us a glory we will never realize. In the poem "The World-Soul" we feel the Emersonian despair emerge strongly.

Alas! the Sprite that haunts us  
 Deceives our rash desire;  
 It whispers of the glorious gods,  
 And leaves us in the mire.<sup>25</sup>

It is also the subject of "Bacchus," and "Ode to Beauty;" we catch it incidentally in "Friendship." But it appears most interestingly in the poem "The Humble-Bee":

....  
 Wiser far than human seer,  
 Yellow-breeched philosopher!  
 Seeing only what is fair,  
 Sipping only what is sweet,  
 Thou dost mock at fate and care,  
 Leave the chaff, and take the wheat.  
 When the fierce northwestern blast  
 Cools sea and land so far and so fast,  
 Thou already slumberest deep;  
 Woe and want thou canst outsleep;  
 Want and woe, which torture us,  
 Thy sleep makes ridiculous.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Stephen E. Whicher, ed., *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology* (Boston, 1960), p. 451.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 417.



For all the idyllic celebration of nature and summer in this poem, it is basically tragic. We may recall, for contrast, the conclusion of the first book *Nature*:

As when the summer comes from the south the snow-banks melt and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its, until evil is no more seen (W, I, pp. 76-77).

Now, Emerson celebrates the eternal summer of the humble-bee—how different from man's inevitable winter! The balance of the seasons in this poem exactly expresses the special blend of faith, skepticism and fate which come habitually to mark his later attitude toward life and nature. At the same time, there is no notion of learning by suffering here. The wise man knows that, to the Soul, want and woe are temporary and unreal; nevertheless, they will always continue to torture us.

Need we pay Emerson the doubtful compliment of insisting that, as H. H. Waggoner and many other critics do, he does not really mean these things, that he does not in fact know moods in which the thought of suffering and even of death give him a grim satisfaction, as preferable to his present fate? Perhaps it is more of a compliment to his humanity to insist that he does know and does mean these things. The reason why he does is not obscure. The breach through which a sense of illusion is able at times to flood his life is the old fact of his powerlessness. He falls prey to it through his surrender to fate. The real sting of the doctrine for Emerson to take is that we do not control our fortunes; we cannot even act to modify our character. What growth we do experience is not our doing; perhaps all experiences leave us exactly where they found us. "We are carried by destiny along our life's course, looking as

grave and knowing as little as the infant who is carried in his wicker coach through the street (W, VI, p. 13)."

Throughout the essay "Fate" there are several passages remarkably revealing of the inexorable aspect of nature and human destiny. The following passage, for instance, shows Emerson's awareness of both the impersonality of nature and the callousness of human heart:

Nature is no sentimentalist, —does not cosset or pamper us. We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind of dust. The cold, inconsiderate of persons, tingles your blood, benumbs your feet, freezes a man like an apple. The diseases, the elements, fortune, gravity, lightning, respect no persons. The way of Providence is a little rude. The habit of snakes and spiders, the snap of the tiger and other leapers of the anaconda, —these are in the system, and our habits are like theirs (W, VI, pp. 6-7).

Here Emerson is not only rejecting his old idea of the benevolent tendency of nature and that "the Universe is the externalization of the soul," but also pointing out that inhuman nature is a ruthless energy little concerned with the fortunes of one individual or another.

According to Emerson's early interpretations of nature, the correspondence between nature and man is that nature is not only a language but a book, that spiritual truths may be read directly from nature, by a purged mind, without the intervention of any other revelation. By now, if there are still correspondences between nature and man, the natural evil corresponds to the cruelty of life. Under such circumstances, even God becomes not just helpless, but his way is wild and and rough:

Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity (W, VI, p. 8).

However, Emerson's optimistic resolution lies in the

idea of polarity between good and evil. "For though Fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits Power, Power attends and antagonizes Fate (W, VI, p. 22)." The final conclusion is eventually affirmative: Fate is the limitation of nature and man, but man's "intellect annuls opinion, in order to achieve his freedom, man has to understand how to make use of the limitation, negations, brute facts, and tyrannies of life." But he should also recognize the power of thought in himself—"On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peatbog, forest, sea and shore; and on the other part, thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature,—here they are, side by side, good and evil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, rising peacefully together in the eye and the brain of every man (W, VI, pp. 22-3)." Man should again realize that his thought not only counters but uses fate, by design, by dream, by will, by moral purpose. "Fate, then is a name for facts not yet passed under fire of thought;—for causes which are unpenetrated (W, VI, p. 31)." Emerson's optimism may be summed up in his defiant claim, "I am *Defeated* all the time; yet to *Victory* I am born."<sup>27</sup> And his spirit of acquiescence can also be epitomized in a sentence from his second essay "Nature": "Let the victory fall where it will, we are on that side (W, III, p. 95)."

If the modern reader does not respond so enthusiastically to this kind of naturalistically optimistic resolution of human fate, he is now certainly struck by the "tragic sense" implied in the word "fate" and expressed in the essay. Both Stephen E. Whicher and Newton Arvin took this essay as a starting point to trace Emerson's "Tragic Sense" and "The House of Pain." "Fate"

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Whicher in *Freedom and Fate*, p. 168.

is an essay, as Newton Arvin asserted, "that should be read by everyone who imagines that for Emerson there were not really any Cape Horns in experience.... Here is all the familiar imagery of naturalistic pessimism—the imagery of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, of plagues and famine, of tooth and claw."<sup>28</sup> If at one pole we find a celebration of the powers of the human will, at the other pole we find an insistence on its limitations—"on the forces in nature that are not friendly but hostile and even destructive to human wishes, and on the discrepancy between what a man aspires to do and what nature and circumstance allow him to do."<sup>29</sup>

Emerson's changing views of nature reflect not only his personal different understandings of the meanings of nature but also all the different influences that his age had exerted on him. As it came to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the benevolent tendency of nature and the moral correspondence between man and nature were no longer accepted as true. With the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the Darwinian concept of nature, taking nature as blindly evolving, has since become widespread and influential.

As the urbanization and industrialization of his age were rapidly developed, people felt that the changed life style and social systems tended to threaten man's self-realization. Emerson found that the machine worker was unmanned by his function in the prevailing economic order. In *English Traits*, for example, he foreshadowed modern social theory with his comments on machine work: "...it is found that the machine unmans the user. What he gains in making cloth, he loses in general power.... The incessant repetition of the same hand-work dwarfs the man, robs him of his strength, wit and

<sup>28</sup> Newton Arvin, "The House of Pain," in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 52.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

versatility, to make a pin polisher, a buckle-maker, or any other specialty (W, V, pp. 166-67).” “The common experience is that the man fits himself as well as he can to the customary details of that work or trade he falls into, and tends it as a dog turns a spit. Then is he a part of the machine he moves; the man is lost (W, II, p. 142).” As he announced near the beginning of “The American Scholar,” socio-economic means were increasingly becoming ends in themselves, and “man is thus metamorphosed into a thing (W, I, p. 83).”

Viewed from the outside, as objects, as mere creatures of nature and society, men live and work within lines that are for the most part drawn not by them but for them. The restrictiveness of nature—the tight limits set about the human will, human aspiration, human effort, by all the forces of heredity and circumstance—was dramatized by the old word Fate. “The Circumstance is Nature,” said Emerson, “Nature is what you may do. There is much you may not do. . . . The book of Nature is the book of Fate (W, VI, pp. 14-15).” Within these natural and material boundaries men are merely the creatures of their conditioning. This view of nature and man is closely related to the reality of his era.

## 愛默生自然觀的演變與其時代的關係

(摘 要)

田 維 新

本文旨在闡明愛默生自然觀演變的過程。從其早期的**自然**一書到晚期的「論經驗」和「論命運」等文，可看出愛默生的自然觀不但隨時在演變，且其演變過程與當時的思想背景有着不可分割的關係。

**自然**出版於一八三六年。因當時機械的發明和工業文明的進步，人類生活享受隨着經濟的成長而提高，然而人與自然的完美配合却因而破壞。過去舊有的價值觀念也不再受到重視。愛默生想藉**自然**這本書來強調人與自然的關係。他認為人與自然的關係是心物融和，而非單純的唯心或唯物。他這種「非我」與「自我」的配合，非常接近中國人之「天人合一」的哲學。

「論自然」及「論自然的法則」二文是愛默生表現其中期自然觀的代表作。這個時期的愛默生深受自然科學（尤其地質學）和達爾文進化論的影響。對人類（尤其當時的美國人）征服自然及社會演進的事實極感興趣。在此二文中，其早期以「靈」包涵在「自我」之內及「自然」為「靈」的外現的說法，已為「靈」在「自我」之外，而人只是自然演進的後期產物觀點所取代。

愛默生晚期的自然觀，在「論經驗」及「論命運」二文中表現的最為明顯。早期出現在**自然**一書中的積極，及對自然所持有的希望和信心已不復可見。取而代之的，是對生命意義的懷疑，及對自然的失望。世界祇是虛有其表，根本沒有精神的內涵。這一點，愛默生與許多二十世紀的美國作家的看法極為相近。

雖然愛默生的哲學思想並非完全建立在他的自然觀上，但他對自然的重視，却可由其一再探討自然的意義而見一斑。