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## EMERSON AND THE EDUCATION OF NATURE

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The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature.

□Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar.”<sup>1</sup>

Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason. Every property of matter is a school for the understanding.

□Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson experienced the natural world as a sort of school. He thought that the school of nature offered both challenging instructors and an unlimited number of lessons. But what are these lessons, for Emerson, and who are these teachers? And how can the education that nature offers be discovered? To talk of the education of nature is, like everything else in Emerson, to speak from one’s own experience. Emerson does not offer systematic argument or rigorous empirical data to support his educational claims. He offers, instead, personal glimpses of educational possibility. It is better to think of him as a journalist who records his own experience. He tells of his experience not merely to chronicle, however, but to provoke. He wants us to compare our experiences with his. If we find that we share Emerson’s experience, we do more than get caught up in his rhetorical finery. We become convinced by his thought.

For Emerson, it seems, there are at least four ways to learn from nature. First, Emerson argues that nature offers the possibility of solitude and, with this solitude, comes silence. The silence allows for the emergence of “voices” that are otherwise marginalized in the dominant technological society. Second, in nature there are unique possibilities for the development of moral thought through distinctive nontechnological metaphors. Third, nature forces us both to see difference and to develop our sense of “worship,” that is, it promotes a feeling that there is an Other, a “not-me,” who is worthy of respect. Fourth, a proper educative relationship with nature allows us to escape the ethical dissonance that can come from being complicit in the destructive forces of modern economies, and, at the same time, to develop our talents as human beings. These four modes of natural education are not separate, however, but converge on the idea of “justice.” The education of nature is about coming to understand our place in and our connections to the world. To understand this is to understand what justice requires.

## HEARING VOICES IN SOLITUDE

To be alone in nature, for Emerson, is to be instructed by a questioning silence. In the world of human technology and culture, I am never alone. “To go into solitude,” writes Emerson, “a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me” (*N*, 37). As I sit by myself in a room, I am surrounded by things that embody the aspirations, activities, and anxieties of the surrounding culture. Each embodies a purpose, but they are not my purposes alone. They are also the purposes of the larger social world. The presence of the tool stirs the mind to rehearse the action of the tool in imagination— in seeing a plow, the mind sees the human activity of sowing and envisions the hope of reaping. The world of technological things speaks to me of the means, ends, and values of the culture in which I am situated.

To be completely alone, one must escape the articulations of these technological artifacts, and this is a flight into nature—into the world outside of human control and design. Emerson finds the flight into solitude best exemplified in stargazing. He writes, “If a man would be alone let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches” (*N*, 37). Stars are in some ways the most “antisocial” of things. We cannot pull them down, change them, or reorder them to meet our needs. Stars have their practical uses in things like navigation, to be sure, but we cannot transform them. They must be left alone and used as they are, in all their undisturbed oblivion. Looking at stars, we are as alone as we will ever be. They do not speak with a technological voice.

Nature educates by distancing us from the noise of the social world and its artifacts. In this respite of solitude, new voices emerge. Emerson says: “These are the voices we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world.”<sup>3</sup> For Emerson, the voice that emerges in solitude is our own voice, which so often lays buried under the weight of social expediency. Dominant society presents a set of expectations and directions, of biases and prejudices, and these are embodied in technological artifacts. But these expectations grow faint in solitude. In nature, new voices emerge and begin to ask new questions. “The solitary places do not seem quite lonely,” Emerson writes. “At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish.”<sup>4</sup>

My experience in nature echoes that of Emerson. Sitting on a ledge high above Cascade Canyon in Grand Teton National Park, I too was in solitude and silence. I sensed that I was completely alone. No one was there to speak to me, or at me, or with me. There were none of the billboards or other forms of the ubiquitous advertising that fill the corners of our senses. “[There] no history, or church, or state, [was] interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year” (*N2*, 261). There was no other directing mind, no clear imprint of human hands. I was alone and quiet, my mind free to wander.

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In such moments, the silence is full of questions that demand answers. This questioning silence asks: What am I when I am here? Who am I apart from the material things that surround me and outside of my particular social circles? How do these social relationships—being around my people and my things—constitute who I am? Answering these questions is only possible (if, indeed, it is possible at all) in the silence of nature. Essayist Thomas Merton argues that in silence “we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday lives.”<sup>5</sup> In such moments, freed from immediate exterior voices, I am finally able to develop what could be called “autonomy.”

I say we are only free from “immediate” voices in silence because Emerson was perhaps too quick to celebrate the absolute solitude in nature, even as one examines those most antisocial of things, the stars. As I look at the stars, I might see the summer constellations—Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Draco, Scorpio. The fact that I see these figures implies that an ordering has been imposed on me from the social world that is manifest even in the supposedly solitary moment of stargazing. But perhaps these are *also* the voices that Emerson has in mind. Perhaps the silence of solitude is about recovering the whispers of others who have been silenced in the dominant culture. The hushed voices liberated in the silence of the stars are, for me, the hushed voices of the mythological past. Thus, I think of Orion and the Pleiades, but not only that. I think of my own past (perhaps an equally “mythological” past). The twinkling little stars bring back songs that once permeated my childhood. They bring back the stories I was told about my ancestor pioneers, traveling under the broad night sky. I think of the ancient people that many years ago gazed in awe at the same nighttime spectacle. In short, my thoughts turn to the past, especially to people who were closer to the land than I am, closer to hunger, cold, and the world of death. Others might hear different voices as their minds are set free to wander, but for me, the voices of solitude include those who filled the past with songs and stories. Wilderness, writes philosopher Albert Borgmann, “speaks out of the past into a present that is largely technological.”<sup>6</sup>

#### NATURE AND MORAL METAPHOR

Nature informs and nourishes our language, it allows us a unique avenue of expression and understanding. Our language of moral and spiritual imagination is particularly enriched. “All things are moral;” writes Emerson, “and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature.” And thus we are “assisted by natural objects in the expression of particular meanings” (*N*, 52). Emerson was, I should point out, a genealogist of morals. Friedrich Nietzsche, the most famous such genealogist, himself a student of Emerson’s essays, would later trace the moral development of Western thought through a pathway of power relationships. For Emerson, the genealogy of moral language traces a different path, namely, the human

experience in the natural world. “Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact,” he writes, “if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance” (*N*, 48). Through analogy, the spiritual and moral realms are connected to the material things existing in the physical world. The supposed distance between the mind and the external world is overcome, for Emerson, by showing how the mind participates in the world. There would be no mind without natural metaphor: “The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass” (*N*, 53). This suggestion is controversial, of course, but Emerson is surely correct that wilderness offers a metaphorical wealth to enrich our mental and moral discourse. “Who can guess,” writes Emerson, “how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman” (*N*, 59)?

Natural metaphors are, in at least one sense, preferable to the technological metaphors with which they may be contrasted. The philosopher Martin Heidegger may proclaim too loudly that there is an essence to modern technology, and that this essence is the impulse to reveal the world as standing reserve.<sup>7</sup> Yet it does seem true that much of modern technology is based on the urge to achieve a greater power over all that surrounds us. If so, then technological metaphors will often carry with them connotations of control and domination. Natural metaphors, conversely, may more often lack these implications, thus making their flavor more palatable to discourses of justice and liberation. Natural metaphors, given force through experience in nature, hold a distinctive potential for moral education.

In support of Emerson’s point about the educative potential of natural metaphors, I turn to two examples of how natural metaphors have enriched my understanding of moral ideas. As I have already point out, the stars structured my moral education, but they gave me more than just a paradigmatic sense of solitude. They also taught me lessons about universality. At the high elevation and dry air of the deserts of southern Utah, the stars are clearly visible—more so than at any other place I have encountered. Lying on my back, surrounded by family, I learned from the stars. It was not so much a package of ideas that were delivered to me, but a positioning. The stars challenged my sense of self and, yet, confirmed it. As Emerson would write, “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes” (*N*, 39). Looking at the vastness of space, I pondered the vast spaces that I could not control and that were indifferent to my existence. As with Emerson, the stars awakened in me “a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible” (*N*, 37). But with this inaccessibility and distance, the stars did not tell me, as they have told others, that I am an inconsequential speck in a seemingly infinite universe. Instead, experiencing this vastness while at the same time being surrounded by loved ones, I realized more clearly where I was. In showing me who I was not and what I could not do, they also reminded me of who I was and what I could do.

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Stars have come to symbolize for me the constant, the changeless, and the universal. The stars speak to me of moral commitment: of keeping promises, of being a loyal friend, of integrity, and of fulfilling my responsibilities. Nature, however, does not speak with one voice. Emerson was one of the great educators on the topic of flux. He teaches how to live a life of change with celebration and flair. “A foolish consistency, is the hobgoblin of little minds,” he would famously write, “adored by little statesman and philosophers and divines.”<sup>8</sup> Given such statements, it comes as no surprise when Emerson admits to being educated by the river: “Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things?” (*N*, 49). The world fluctuates and changes; nature shows itself to be a “system in transition” (*N2*, 266). The world changes and the mind should change with it. Its growth should not be sacrificed to cut a consistent social or intellectual image. Nature teaches by example to change, to grow, and to become something different.

Another great teacher on the topic of flux was Heraclitus of Ephesus, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher. Like Emerson, he taught using the river (the same one you cannot step in twice), but was also inspired by the imagery of fire: “The world...it was ever, is now, and ever will be an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out.”<sup>9</sup> Fire has been my teacher, as it was for Heraclitus. The flames of a campfire surge and roar as the fire builds—never illuminating the scene in quite the same way twice—and diminish as the fire dies and the surrounding conversation inevitably turns quiet and somber. The social mood changes in rhythm with the fire’s pattern of rise and fall; it creates an endless procession of unique moments. “To the attentive eye,” writes Emerson, “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” (*N*, 44). The flux of the natural world not only teaches me to change along with the world, but also that there is beauty in this change. It has taught me to value the particular, the situational, and the relative.

The natural world, combining the flowing river and steady stars, is a mixture of lessons about stability amid ceaseless fluidity. Nature seems to balance flux and firmness through recurring patterns. The patterns bring a unity to variety: “Herein is especially apprehended the unity of Nature,—the unity in variety,—which meets us everywhere” (*N*, 59). This balance also offers lessons about justice. We may always ask the perennial questions: Is justice an absolute, unchanging universal, like the stars? Or, does justice exist in the particulars of each situation, like a river or a fire? The idea of justice in nature is revealed in this unity amidst variety. The flow of particular situations, each one fleeting in itself, shows patterns over time. In similar fashion, justice is about a diverse collection of things finding some degree of harmony together, and in that harmony, peace. Justice is a reflective equilibrium between the universal and particular.

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## LEARNING TO “WORSHIP”

“The clock and the compass,” Emerson writes, “do us harm by hindering us from astronomy.” Indeed, the technological world can seem so obvious. The existence of the interstate freeway is difficult to miss. With this sort of road, the path to follow is marked by large signs and four lanes of concrete pointing toward the horizon. There is no need to search the lay of the land for a faint path or to look to the stars for the proper direction. In technological society, it is easy to find out what the weather will be—the information is chanted by highly specialized climatic priests several times an hour through dozens of different media. And it is only these specialists, Emerson thinks, who “have got the education.” Those who are divorced from such direct sensorial relationships with nature “have only the commodity.”<sup>10</sup>

The natural world demands a heightened use of the senses; it teaches us to hear, to feel, to taste, to perceive, to classify, and to test our powers to see difference. Thus, Emerson argues that natural science sharpens the discrimination while “cities give not the human senses room enough” (*N2*, 261). Of course, learning to see difference by itself could lead to unjust discrimination. For justice, more is required than seeing difference—we may see the different and then oppress what is the different. Nature not only gives practice in helping to see the other, it also offers practice in giving worth to the other. It turns seeing difference into recognition. Nature, Emerson noted, inspires religious feelings: “The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship” (*N*, 71).

The word “worship” can be traced back to the Old English *weorthscipe*. Its roots suggest creating or bringing forth honor or dignity. Emerson is telling us that in wilderness, we can learn to create honor or dignity, and to give this respect to what is not-me. In nature, our “mean egotism” vanishes and we learn to worship. To learn how to worship is to create respect for things that exist beyond the ego. “Therefore,” writes Emerson, “is Nature ever the ally of Religion: lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment.” In this sense, he says, “All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel” (*N*, 58[59])?

I too have learned to “give worth” through nature. I once stood atop the East Rim Trail of Zion National Park, a red-rock canyon opening up below me, engulfing my mean egotism. This part of nature is particularly devout, its towering cliffs the early Mormon pioneers adorned with biblical imagery—“Angel’s Landing,” for example, and “The Three Patriarchs.” I came to understand why this religious imagery was deemed so appropriate. In this part of nature, I sensed a world beyond myself, full of majesty, history, and beauty—a world apart from me that was worthy of respect. The respect was not simply directed toward a traditional deity, but to all that I felt was around me. It extended to the people around me, and to the flora and fauna. And it was not a

world where I felt unwelcome. There was a feeling of belonging. I could understand Emerson's sentiments, when he writes:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable....Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right. (*N*, 39)

The awareness of the hidden relationship between nature and ourselves, Emerson says, sparks in us a higher thought. This thought, it seems, is the awareness of a connection to what is different. Notice that to worship does entail, for Emerson, a denial of one's own worth. It entails an affirmation of respect for the other, but it is an affirmation that lifts the self as well as the other. The natural things in the world, he says, "nod to me, and I to them" (*N*, 39).

Nature, then, at least for some people, performs two distinct functions and both contribute to the development of our sense of justice. First, it forces us to refine our sensibilities so that we can "see" difference. Second, it can open up a sense of worship, that is, of giving worth to that which we find to be different. In nature are the seeds of a positive discrimination, a recognition. In nature, it seems, are the seeds of justice.

#### ECONOMIC COMPLICITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

Emerson teaches us how to live in an environment where it is easy to be complicit in the work of injustice. He inspects his surroundings, he looks at the perks and privileges of the life he enjoys, and he becomes troubled by the price paid in blood and sorrow to grant him that life. The more he lives, the more he realizes that to be involved in the world's economy is to participate in the perpetuation of injustice. It is not simply the corporate tycoon that has violated his integrity, but everyone else, as well:

We are all implicated of course in this charge; it is only necessary to ask a few questions as to the progress of the articles of commerce from the fields where they grew, to our houses, to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities. (*MR*, 132)

Emerson looks to a few everyday items, like the sugar of his day created through the brutal Cuban slave trade, and traces a grim history behind their production and transportation. He stresses that everybody is involved in furthering this work of sorrow, loneliness, and untimely death.

I do not charge the merchant or the manufacturer. The sins of our trade belong to no class, to no individual. One plucks, one distributes, one eats. Every body partakes...yet none feels himself

accountable....That is the vice,—that no one feels himself called to act for man, but only as a fraction of man. (*MR*, 133)

Emerson would perhaps be disturbed at how little we have changed, and how little we reflect on our habits of economic production and consumption. Emerson felt guilty when he ate sugar; I feel guilty as I drive when I could walk, or shop at the discount superstore. Emerson recognized that in any economic system there is no relevant moral distinction between those who produce unjustly and those who enjoy the unjust production. Each is playing a part. To be aware of one's economic existence in modern society, and to partake of the material bounty the society offers, is to endure a troubling moral dissonance.

So what can be done? Emerson's solution to this injustice is what he calls the "doctrine of the Farm." Emerson introduces this doctrine by saying that we should "put ourselves into primary relations with the soil and nature, and [abstain] from whatever is dishonest and unclean, to take each of us bravely his part, with his own hands, in the manual labor of the world" (*MR*, 134). The problem of our complicity can only be solved by sustaining our own physical needs through work that is "close" to us. By saying this, he does not necessarily mean everybody should all become farmers: "[T]he doctrine of the Farm is merely this," he writes, "that every man ought to stand in primary relations with the work of the world" (*MR*, 137). He is saying that the less our products pass through hands beyond our vision and control, the better. Thus, when possible this could mean that we should build our own houses, grow our own food, and sew our own clothes. Or we should at least know personally, and be connected, to those who perform the labor in our behalf. This way we can monitor the forces of production for moral lapses, something we are not able to do when we are distant from the life of economic production.

What does this have to do with education? Emerson, it seems, is not content to justify the "doctrine of the farm" in terms of justice, but also justifies it in terms of individual education. "Manual labor," he writes, "is the study of the external world." He continues:

[N]ot only health, but education is in the work. Is it possible that I, who get indefinite quantities of sugar, hominy, cotton, buckets, crockery-ware, and letter-paper, by simply signing my name...get the fair share of exercise to my faculties by that act which nature intended for me in making all these far-fetched matters important to my comfort? (*MR*, 135)

There is a convergence of interests here. In having a primary relationship to nature, which is a direct relationship to the physical work of the world, we both achieve a more just relationship to those that surround us and increase the power of our own faculties. There is a harmony between self-development, the demands of justice, and a proper relationship to nature.

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## CONCLUSION

“Nature,” writes Emerson, “is loved by what is best in us” (*N2*, 264). Nature is loved by the part of us that does not seek to dominate, diminish, or destroy. Nature is loved by the part of us that longs to hear the voices—our own hidden voice and those of others that are silenced in technological culture. Nature is loved by the part of us that loves wisdom, and that finds metaphors and analogies for the moral life within ecological systems. Nature is loved by the part of us that gives respect and honor to the not-me, while at the same time acknowledging our own rightful place within the world. Nature is loved by the part of us that wants to stand in a proper relationship to the world of production and consumption, the part that refuses to live at the expense of another. Nature is loved by the part of us that loves justice. “The sunset,” writes Emerson, “is unlike any thing that is underneath it: it wants men. And the beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking, until the landscape has human figures, that are as good as itself” (*N2*, 264).

## NOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays*, ed. L. Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 85.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 55. This work will be cited in the text as *N* for all subsequent references.
3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 178.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 1992), 260. This work will be cited in the text as *N2* for all subsequent references.
5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1965), 39.
6. Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 120.
7. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
8. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 183.
9. Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 20, <http://www.tesc.edu/~rprice/heraclitus.htm>.
10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Man the Reformer,” in Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 135. This work will be cited in the text as *MR* for all subsequent references.