

Joy A. Palmer Cooper and David E. Cooper, eds., *Key Thinkers on the Environment*, London, Routledge, 2018. Revised edition of Joy A. Palmer, ed., *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*, Routledge, 2001. Pages 93-100.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON 1803–82

Ralph Waldo Emerson once penned in his *Journals*, 'Right is a conformity to the laws of nature so far as they are known to the human mind',¹ against which we can set as a retort John Stuart Mill, 'Conformity to nature has no connection whatever with right and wrong'.² Mill is emphatic about humans and their achievements: 'All praise of Civilization, or Art, or Contrivance, is so much dispraise of Nature'.³ Emerson demurs, with characteristic poetic vigour: 'In

their vaunted works of Art, The master-stroke is still her part'.⁴ The two met once, the transcendentalist sage of New England and the British logician framing the techniques of empirical science, contemporaries setting the contrasts of their times.

Seen now, a century and a half later, Emerson was launching an ecological view, 'harmony' with nature (we might say, rather than 'conformity'), lost as this has largely been during the flowering of humanism, science and technology, the liberal 'modernism' of whom Mill is an early type specimen. What now seems clear is that humans are nowhere near a sustainable relationship with their planet Earth, and that a radical separation, humans over nature, 'dispraising' it, has been as much part of the problem as part of the solution.

Emerson was reared in nineteenth-century New England, a promising Harvard graduate, one-time Unitarian minister. He became an iconoclast critic of his establishment. He delivered a controversial Harvard Divinity School address and was not invited back for thirty years. He gained fame from his literary essays, espousing a spiritual relationship to nature, intuitively known, ultimately an idealism of self-reliance residing in a deeply sacred world. His life was spent in Concord, outside Boston, a quiet domestic life in then rural Massachusetts, but adjacent to the Boston centres of intellectual life. Over time the novelty of his views accommodated somewhat to society; society accommodated somewhat to him. Along with Henry David Thoreau, Emerson was entered among the worthy geniuses of the traditions of which he had been so critical.

Emerson is a 'romantic', provided one correctly understands this now somewhat outmoded term. The reference is not to a suitor overly swayed by love, but to a philosophical movement, Romanticism, that reacted to an Enlightenment overemphasis on rationalism, objectivity, Cartesian dualism, and hard science, mind versus matter, the new science that was bringing increased competence at exploiting the world, and at the same time decreased confidence about the place of humans in the scheme of things. Emerson was wondering already about the negative results. Provocatively we might say that Emerson is already a 'postmodernist', or at least that he is uncomfortable with the increasingly assertive urban, urbane 'modernism' secularizing Boston life and at once civilizing it and alienating it from the New England landscape.

Keep 'romance' in life, Emerson says; or, we might say: 'love life' in its rich fullness. Enjoy life as an 'epic, adventurous narrative' (one meaning of the French *roman* and of the English *romance*). The

good life is not so much reasoned analysis, dominion over nature, rebuilt environment conquering nature; rather (as the feminists would now say) life requires appropriate respect, sensitivity and 'caring' whether in culture or nature. Humans need a deep sense of engagement with the landscape. 'Nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind.'⁵

Two of Emerson's works, similarly titled, introduce his thought. The first is his earlier small book entitled *Nature*, the original transcendentalist manifesto of 1836. The second is a later essay, 'Nature', published in 1844. 'Nature' begins with a poem:

The rounded world is fair to see;
 Nine times folded in mystery:
 Though baffled seers cannot impart
 The secret of its laboring heart,
 Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast,
 And all is clear from east to west.

The learned seers at Harvard University (rationalists, empiricists, scientists) are 'baffled' by the developing astronomy, geology and historical biology. They puzzled over the clockwork heavens, the rock strata, the fossil record. Asa Gray was filling his herbarium with strange plants from around the world. Science was upsetting old world-views; but an attuned heart throb understands. The sciences cannot teach us all we need to know about nature; indeed they cannot teach what we need most to know: how to value it. The wise person needs to 'transcend' this cold, mechanistic universe, known by reason and observation in its causal sequences, and to realize deeper truths.

Nature cannot be understood merely as a commodity, a *resource*; it can only be understood in *romance*. So Emerson revels in nature's 'sanctity', in the 'spell' of nature; its 'enchantments'. 'We ... make friends with matter', reconciling mind and matter. Nature 'shames us out of our nonsense'. 'Cities give not the human senses room enough.'⁶ Richer aesthetic experiences are possible in forest and field – more to see, smell, touch, taste, more sense of space, time, place, proportion.

Less than a quarter of a mile away, at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau agreed: 'In Wildness is the preservation of the World'.⁷ Socrates claimed: 'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open

country won't teach me anything, whereas men in town do'.⁸ But Emerson and Thoreau objected.

In *Nature* Emerson argues that nature yields: Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline. The planet's endless circulations give us sustenance, life, life-support, and prosperity. All the human useful arts but further embellish these natural cycles. As we now say, an ecology underlies every economy – a fact Bostonians were increasingly inclined to neglect. Nobler wants are served by the beauties of woods and sky. 'There is ... the necessity of being beautiful under which every landscape lies.'⁹ Such beauty is reciprocal and ancillary to human character and intellectual life. In current vocabulary, Emerson has a 'virtue ethics'.

Nature's function is linguistic or sacramental. 'Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.'¹⁰ Rivers speak of the flux of things; rocks speak of permanence. Nature equally offers stability and dynamism – the everlasting hills, the timeless natural givens, wind, rain, sea, sky, land. Language, indeed all wisdom, roots in these earthy, proverbial symbols, as when we say that what you sow you reap, or that into each life some rain must fall. Nature disciplines, schools the will. As nature confronts us, and we figure life out, character unfolds.

'There are all degrees of natural influence', from the commodity of 'the bucket of cold water from the spring', across a spectrum to the sacramental and 'sublime moral of autumn and of noon'. 'We nestle in nature, and draw our living as parasites from her roots and grains.' 'It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object.'¹¹ We never have a bad day if we have enjoyed a snowfall, a field of waving grain, or wildflowers. 'He who knows the most, he who knows what sweets and virtues are in the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come at these enchantments, is the rich and royal man.'¹²

Nature has correlate aspects. *Natura naturata* (borrowing from medieval Scholasticism) is particular separated objects, passive, inert. These result from *natura naturans* – active energetic, the restless processes generating such objects, expressing itself in diverse and varied forms.¹³ In myth, this is Mother Nature; etymologically, the root meaning of 'nature' is to give birth or spring forth. In science, this is creative natural history.

Though pre-Darwinian, Emerson is already accepting an evolutionary advance over long timespans: 'Geology has ... taught us to ... exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her larger style. We knew nothing rightly, for want of perspective ... What patient

periods must round themselves before the rock is formed, then before the rock is broken ... into soil, and opened the door for the remote Flora, Fauna ... How far off yet is the trilobite! ... It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato.¹⁴

There are two faces – ‘secrets’, as Emerson calls them – of nature:

- 1 Motion, process, the flux of things, an *élan vital*, catches the element of change and development. Nature is always moving on: a ‘system in transition’, breaking through to new achievements in know-how and power. ‘Plants ... grope ever upward toward consciousness; the trees are imperfect men.’¹⁵ Nature, to use current vocabulary, is ‘self-organizing’.
- 2 Rest, changelessness or identity catches a complementary dimension. The same laws and materials are present in all its forms – from stars to men. Matter is conserved, as is energy; there is homeostasis and re-cycling. ‘From the beginning to the end of the universe, she (Nature) has but one stuff.’ ‘The direction is forever onward, but the artist still goes back for materials, and begins again with the first elements on the most advanced stage.’¹⁶ ‘Nature is a mutable cloud, which is always and never the same.’¹⁷ Nature’s diversity and unity, its stability and spontaneity, are dialectical and complementary values.

Emerson sees wisdom in what we now call co-evolution. An animal is armed, given a niche, yet checked by its predators. An animal lives in an environment, yet has to maintain itself against that environment. So birds have feathers. Nature’s order is enthusiastic and extravagant; nature seems to overdo it, but thereby succeeds. ‘Exaggeration is in the course of things. Nature sends no creature, no man into the world, without adding a small excess of his proper quality ... Nature ... makes them a little wrong-headed in that direction in which they are rightest.’¹⁸ We first think that an oak tree makes too many acorns or that the squirrel in the oak is too nervous. But the seeming waste of seeds and the squirrel’s instinctive fear, usually groundless, ensures the propagation of their species. In the checks and balances of an ecosystem, this results in beauty and integrity in the biotic community, as Leopold later termed it. The ‘calculated profusion’¹⁹ adds excitement, efficiency, creativity and diversity.

There are similarities here to recent thought about the spontaneous generation of integrated order in decentralized systems, as happens in society with language and markets, or in nature with

ecosystems. Such decentralized order is not low quality; to the contrary, it is richer and more diverse than centralized order.

Human life and society are, or ought to be, lived in continuity with nature. 'A man does not tie his shoe, without recognizing laws which bind the farthest regions of nature.' 'We talk of deviations from natural life, as if artificial life were not also natural.' Yet in humans there is novelty added to identity. We are not simply to 'camp out and eat roots; but let us be men and not woodchucks'.²⁰ Still, we should not look for the meaning of life in technological advances – hoping using electromagnetism to grow salads quickly (or, we might say, microwave ovens to cook chicken instantly). Such accomplishments will never replace living out our threescore and ten years with roots in the soil, enjoying the seasons, spring salads included. 'Nothing is gained: nature cannot be cheated: man's life is but seventy salads long.'²¹

Homo sapiens is a microcosm, an epitome or compendium of nature, in whom nature comes to completion. At times, Emerson can seem anthropocentrist: 'All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life.'²² Natural phenomena have their glory unrealized, until humans wake up to this, and this is a principal destiny of humankind.

Emerson closes 'Nature' trying to make sense of a certain 'deceit' in the 'face of external nature', in contrast to his opening revelry in its beauty. We travel hopefully and never arrive. 'There is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on. All promise outruns performance.' There is 'friction' and 'inconvenience'. 'Must we not suppose somewhere in the universe a slight treachery and derision?'²³

At first yes, but ultimately no. A better perspective sees a creative discontent in which nature satisfies, but never quite fully. She is ever 'inaccessible', always remaining at an unconquerable 'distance'. We never arrive at possessing nature – 'always a referred existence, an absence, never a presence and satisfaction'. Nature is 'a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained'. She is 'fathomless'. We only touch her 'outskirts'. We never reach the end of the rainbow. This may overwhelm us with 'uneasiness' and 'helplessness', but rightly understood this should give a sense of transcendence, a higher power, a spiritual universe.²⁴ If, in these secular years, this seems overly romantic, consider Loren Eiseley's exclamation, as a paleontologist: 'Nature itself is one vast miracle transcending the reality of night and nothingness'.²⁵

Emerson concludes his brooding over nature in the philosophical idealism that underlies all his thought: 'Nature is the incarnation of a thought . . . The world is mind precipitated'.²⁶ But it takes long insight to see this.

Notes

- 1 *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 208.
- 2 John Stuart Mill, 'Nature', 1874, in *Collected Works*, vol. 10, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 400, 1963-77.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- 4 'Nature II', p. 226.
- 5 'The American Scholar', p. 55.
- 6 'Nature' (1844), p. 382.
- 7 Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', 1862, in *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode, New York: Penguin Books, p. 609, 1980.
- 8 *Phaedrus*, 230d.
- 9 'Nature' (1844), p. 386.
- 10 *Nature* (1836), p. 18.
- 11 'Nature' (1844), p. 382.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 389-90.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 389.
- 17 'History', p. 8.
- 18 'Nature' (1844), p. 392.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 393.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 390-1.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 400.
- 22 *Nature* (1836), p. 19.
- 23 'Nature' (1844), pp. 396-8.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 398-9.
- 25 Loren Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time*, New York: Atheneum, p. 171, 1960.
- 26 'Nature' (1844), p. 400.

See also in this book

Carson, Darwin, Griffin, Lovelock, Thoreau

Emerson's major writings

The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Nature, 1836, in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 7-45.

'The American Scholar', 1837, in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, pp. 49-70.

'Nature', 1844, in *Emerson's Essays*, New York: Thomas Crowell, pp. 380-401, 1961.

Journals, Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1910.
'Nature II' (a poem), in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*,
vol. 9, Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company, p. 226, 1918.
'History', in *Collected Works*, vol. 2, pp. 3-23.

Further reading

Richardson, Jr, Robert D., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press, 1995. Contains a chapter on 'Nature'.

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