

Emerson and Thoreau on America the Beautiful

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Our era is marked by a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, commercialization and material acquisition are dominant themes of American life, yet on the other hand, we have collectively embraced a vision of ourselves living in a universe marked by beauty, a rich source of personal value. So, while we are tugged by the allure of "things" we might purchase, there remains a strong undercurrent to "return to nature" for spiritual renewal and aesthetic communion. This vision of pastoral nature is part of the Romantic tide that stormed out of the rational Enlightenment, and whose aesthetic claims remain potent in our own culture. I might live in a big Eastern city, but even as an urban dweller, I am immersed in powerful advertising images that evoke my own presence in the wild — scenic images of off-road four-wheel drive vehicles climbing mountains or running brooks cooling beer bottles. I am constantly reminded of the precious humane resources of Mother Nature in the debates swirling around environmental issues of public policy. American literature, art, and cinema often appeal to my sharing the collective national experience of conquering the frontier and living in some ideal pastoral balance with nature. The principal source of these self-images is in ante-bellum New England, when a singular American source of romantic expression brought together a religious and aesthetic ethos to frame our own consciousness of nature.

In the mid-nineteenth century, when objective observation under the banner of scientific truth and technological advance became dominant themes in Western culture, American Romantics struggled with fashioning the world as their own. These artists and scholars, acutely aware of the conflict between aesthetic and scientific visions of the universe, made this tension itself the theme of their work. Their message retains its appeal and continues to influence how we think of ourselves in the natural environment, indeed, how that placement is constitutive to our very identities. I have chosen Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) as the key expressions of this vision of the natural world. They combined a complex religious tradition with a self-conscious aesthetic sensibility, and although products of another era, their message is abiding and firmly embedded in our own culture.

Emerson's Metaphysics

A more thorough account of the ideas that lie at the foundation of the Romantics' attitude towards nature would commence with the Puritans (Miller 1956) and proceed with a review of the Bartrams, Audubon, and, penultimately, Lewis and Clark, but instead, I begin with Emerson. I do so not because of his archetypal authority in nineteenth-century American letters or his profound impact on the course of American philosophy in the voice of pragmatism (Goodman 1990), and even on wider Western thought as he inspired Nietzsche (Stack 1992), but rather because of his direct relevance to twenty-first-century notions of nature and our relation to it. Beyond influencing his contemporaries and immediate successors, I am going to ask a more immediate question: Does Emerson's Transcendentalism persist today? My answer, not surprisingly, is affirmative. I maintain that he is our leading exponent of the idea that our relationship with nature is deeply personal and meaningful; that nature is intimate to our very being; that in opposition to a materialist conception of nature, we embrace nature as an expression of the spiritual and the beautiful; and finally, because the sublime is constitutive to nature, an essentially religious and aesthetic sensibility serves as our basic link to Her. Emerson was not the originator of these ideas, but he was their chief American expositor.

Let us begin with Emerson's short manifesto, *Nature*, published in 1836. There he outlines his key precepts of Man's relation to Nature, which in essence is a metaphysical statement from which we can trace virtually all of his later work. Emerson was a pulpit minister until 1832, and in many ways never gave up his initial vocation. The questions which informed his early development as a preacher re-appeared in only somewhat different guise in his avatar as a secular essayist. I believe we can only understand Emerson in the context of his religious concerns, which required a much wider scope than that offered even by the most liberal Unitarian congregation. These considerations are crucial in understanding the context of Emerson's writings, namely that he wrote in the throes of a religious crisis, and his philosophy is permeated with questions of the spirit. In these terms we might well appreciate that while Emerson was no philosopher in any formal sense, he sought philosophical solutions from two major sources, an intriguing hybrid of neo-Platonism, especially that of

Plotinus, and post-Kantian idealism (Richardson 1995). Elements of each will become apparent as I sketch the Emersonian composite.

For Emerson, like so many of his romantic contemporaries, Nature was, in effect, the necessary expression of the divine.¹ He conceived the universe as composed of soul, or spirit, and nature. Spirit is life itself, a projection of God. The creative life force in nature sustains and reproduces life, indeed, spirit is transformed according to physical laws, and projected into matter.

There is truly but one miracle, the perpetual fact of Being and Becoming, the ceaseless saliency, the transit from the Vast to the particular, which miracle, one and the same, has for its most universal name the word *God*. (1970, p. 71)

Both the activity of natural forms and the laws of their activity perfectly express the supreme mind, and thus Emerson rejected materialism and sought a form of idealism which grants primacy to the spirit while acknowledging the objective reality of the world. This became his central project.

Although Emerson distrusted sense impressions, he could not accept his own suggestion that perhaps nature is simply an "apocalypse of the mind." In fact, in adopting a Kantian perspective, Emerson held that nature is a phenomenon, an object of experience. But that experience has a spiritual bias, or perhaps a teleological tilt to its organization and role. We discern this both by the way he arrived at this position — simply by metaphysical assertion, based, I assume, on the essential divinity of the "Is" and the "Becoming" of the cosmos, and in the manner that he claims that spirit fulfills an existential function: Our role, as knowing creatures, is in effect to articulate nature by our own witnessing of it. Emerson essentially asserts a teleological natural religion, where nature exists not for its own sake but as a means to an end: "It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it." This entire enterprise is designed to 'emancipate us.' At root, Emerson is still preaching, to free us not from sin, God forbid!, but from our spiritual isolation. Nature, if properly engaged, becomes the means to our personal salvation, the encounter by which meaning and significance emerges.

Emerson's thought revolves around the problem of selfhood, principally its definition in relation to Spirit. He faced two principle challenges: secularization accompanied by the concomitant doubt about the relationship, if any, between Creator and Man, and a second closely related problem, namely, a new primacy affirmed for individual autonomy that would claim to appropriate meaning solely on its own terms. Wary of generalization, it is still appropriate to characterize Emerson's generation as uniquely embracing a new theology of selfhood. In one of those fitting coincidences, at the precise moment Emerson left his pulpit to pursue his own spiritual path, "individualism" was independently coined by two French commentators, Alexis de Tocqueville and Michael Chevalier, to describe Americans (Shain 1994, pp. 90-2; see also pp. 112ff.). Emerson might then be regarded as an exemplar of his age, distinguished by a singular achievement: He presented a philosophical scaffolding for a religious sensibility grounded in the self. In short, Emerson, proselytized the "divine sufficiency of the individual" (Parrington 1927, 1987, p. 390).

Like Fichte's radical dependence on the knowing I, Emerson places individual consciousness at the center of the universe. Emerson's vision is bi-focal: On the one hand he asserts that nature by itself cannot constitute reality, for reality must include — indeed, it may be a function of — consciousness. On the other hand, man equally depends on nature, for without the "not me," he could not become conscious. Emersonian idealism is, broadly speaking, Kantian, where both the world and idea depend upon each other, and indeed, reality is a synthesis of the two, held together by the coherence of the spirit.

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. ("The Oversoul" 1979, p. 160)

Beyond the reciprocity of nature's dependence on consciousness and Man's dependence on nature to articulate his own consciousness, nature is also

the vehicle that permits the universal spirit to address humans. Thus God speaks through Nature to Man.

And how does Nature speak? Through correspondence. Natural phenomena are the symbols of the spirit, for in itself, nature is "deaf and dumb." But as symbol, nature provides us with a language, by which we might gain, through correspondence, insight, meaning, and signification. The distinctly romantic construction appears in the sublimity of individualized experience, the acute sensitivity of the beholder, and the creative sophistication of his or her aesthetic "reading" of nature. The attained insight thus depends on human imagination and effort.

Experience may baffle or distract us, but Emerson appreciates the divine in the ordinary ("We see God face to face every hour, and know the savor of Nature" [*Conduct of Life*, 1883, p. 306] and relishes the rare moments of heightened lucidity that comes in recognizing divine presence: "And when, by and by, for an instant, the air clears and the cloud lifts a little, there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones, — they alone with him alone" (ibid. p. 308). He is willing to pay the high price for his self-consciousness and lost innocence that extracts this challenge. He readily admits that

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 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 its way. The world looks very bare and cold. We have lost our Hope, we have lost our spring. ("The Present Age" 1964, p. 169)

But the burdens are well worth the costs, for he goes on to claim a great opportunity for a new salvation:

Then, the act of reflection has its own good. If the ancient possessed one world, we have two. Let us accept with joy the lofty destiny of exploration and discovery in the hidden regions of thought. Let us pay with joy the price of resigning somewhat of simplicity and union with nature, for the compensation of the sublime pleasures of

reading the spiritual sense of nature and life. For my part I am content there shall be a certain slight discord in the song of the moving stars, if that discord arise from my ear being opened to the undersong of spirits. This insight, this introversion gives us to know that all the seeming confusion of events and voices around us, beheld from a certain elevation of thought, become orderly and musical. (Ibid., p. 171)

When Emerson ended *Nature* with the proclamation that each person must create his own world, he meant precisely that.

Every spirit builds itself a house and beyond its house a world and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do....[L]ine for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. (*Nature*, p. 44)

Man thus becomes his own arbiter of the world, and the self-reliance of his freedom to understand becomes Emerson's declaration of selfhood, one ultimately constituted as a religious credo, clothed in the garb of a secularized metaphysics, but very much grounded in a religious consciousness. Perhaps that is what accounts for its quaint American character, and persistence. Remarkably, Emerson's religious thought has percolated down to us through the past century and a half in the most ingeniously disguised forms. How a sermon, disguised as philosophy and transmitted on the byroads of environmentalism became a new American religion remains one of our more interesting national anomalies. I cannot delve into that rich story here, but I will suggest its contours by illustrating how the Emersonian program was promoted by his most interesting student.

Thoreau, the Disciple

Let me begin my excursion from Emerson's library by following the path of his most earnest, if not conflicted disciple, Henry David Thoreau. Despite Thoreau's acute anxiety of influence, we can clearly discern the

Emersonian program in the younger man's own ventures, and I will single out for consideration the form of idealism Thoreau adopted, namely, his construction of the subject-object relationship.

Concerning Thoreau's own view of idealism, consider the following journal entry of 1858, well into his mature period, which means long after his emotional break with Emerson. It is only one of the many examples I might offer:

I am not so ready to perceive the illusion that is Nature. I certainly come nearer, to say the least, to an actual and joyful intercourse with her. Every day I have more or less communion with her, as I think. At least, I do not feel as if I must withdraw out of nature [as with society]. I feel like a welcome guest. Yet, strictly speaking, the same must be true of nature and of man; our ideal is the only real. It is not the finite and temporal that satisfies or concerns us in either case. (Emphasis in original; November 3, 1858, Journal Vol. XI ([1906]1962, p. 282)

Two cardinal points are illustrated here: The first refers to a characteristic of Thoreau's writing of nature, where the subject-object dichotomy is blurred. This is a complex issue, ranging over his affinity with mystical pursuits to the self-conscious epistemological quandary of his identity as a knower. While much has been made of Thoreau's being far more empirically oriented than Emerson (Porte 1966), who at best was a lounge chair naturalist, Thoreau explicitly accepts in this journal entry that he communes with nature *as he thinks*, as he thinks *of* nature. This distancing is not to be confused with the *product* of that observation - the communion *with* nature (Tauber 2001 pp. 93-103). These are two distinct categories of experience - one is epistemological (the relation of subject and object) and the other is metaphysical (the spiritual or mystical union of man with divine nature). The second point closely rests on the key theme of the passage: "our ideal is the only real." "Ideal" may be understood as rarefied or exemplary, but I think it safe to expand Thoreau's meaning to "idea." The concrete now of the finite is not the object of his inquiry. While immediate experience is the vehicle of his project, this would not gratify him, for he is always contemplating, thinking to seek meaning, and thus he closely follows

his mentor's agenda in his method and purpose. Every natural fact is also a spiritual fact to the sensitive observer.

But Thoreau had a three-pronged pursuit — empirical, aesthetic, and mystical. While we may be struck by Thoreau's multiple notebooks filled with detailed descriptions ranging from careful (if not obsessive) measurements of dispersed seeds, soundings of Walden Pond, documentation of the first appearance of plants, or the behavior of animals and birds, these pale in comparison to his passion for contemplation, dream, memory, trance as evidence of his aesthetic and spiritual quests. The message Thoreau was most interested in communicating pertained to experience outside normal discourse, indeed beyond normal cognition. He struggled to reconcile divergent aspects of his intelligence, for while steeped in a scientific ethos that rewarded objective, clear description, he knew that his deepest experience of the Spirit could not be so reported. He might refer to eternity, the celestial spheres, the ancient truths, Higher Laws, the divine, the Brahma — influenced by his readings in Hinduism (Versluis 1993) — but in the end he relied on another convention, the encompassing Romantic ideal for all of these allusions to the Beyond, *Intelligence*, which might be 'known' only through *sympathy*.

My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we call Knowledge before, - a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot *know* in any higher sense than this, any more than he can look serenely and with impunity in the face of the sun. ("Walking" 1980, p. 128)

This passage from his celebrated essay, "Walking" is deeply indebted to Emerson. While the rhetoric is distinctly Thoreau's, its philosophy is Emerson's. Thoreau declares forthrightly and with no hint of irony or qualification the premier position of *Intelligence*, the Emersonian Spirit. All those activities that qualify in the hierarchy of the sciences and human

sciences, are decisively auxiliary to the ephemeral, elusive, 'unknowing' Beyond. It was here that Thoreau directed much of his efforts, and in this fashion became a true disciple of Emerson.²

While objectivity for Thoreau had its place, he held that 'facts' were significant only in a personal context. Thus facts revealed both the beauty of nature and, perhaps more profoundly, the moral lessons that might be gleaned from that study. As Thoreau wrote in his 1852 journal,

Nature has looked uncommonly bare & dry to me for a day or two. With our senses applied to the surrounding world we are reading our own physical & corresponding moral revolutions. Nature was so shallow all at once I did not know what had attracted me all my life. I was therefore encouraged when going through a field this evening, I was unexpectedly struck with the beauty of an apple tree - The perception of beauty is a moral test. (Thoreau, June 21, 1852, Journal 5, 1997, p. 120)

In this context, "moral" does not mean good or evil, but more generally, *valued*, and the point Thoreau makes to himself is that to appreciate nature requires an effort, a deliberate search for beauty, from which significance and meaning follow.

To make the ordinary extraordinary became the moral endeavor Thoreau set himself. The consequence? Thoreau possessed a unique view of nature, essentially creating by means of an astute sense of detail and a poetic eye, the world in which he lived. This he accomplished as an act of will, asserting the primacy of his own knowing. *What* he saw was determined by *how* he saw and the value bestowed on the object of scrutiny. To see the world as beautiful and spiritual, Thoreau placed lenses of enhanced sensibility before his eyes, both to focus his sight and filter it. Thus the very act of observing became a moral test, a test of his values and his ability to live by them. This hardly describes the work of an ordinary scientist, or even of a "natural philosopher." It was, however, the expression of an artist working in a new medium.

Thoreau followed a two-step process: First, he gathered facts with meticulous attention — dating the first appearance of flowers, sounding Walden Pond, marking the weather daily, observing animal habits, and the like. He was known to sit in a swamp for hours, recording what he saw in a

small notebook, and then transcribing his findings into a journal, which he carefully maintained throughout his adult life, a record of over two million words. But it was after he had scrupulously recorded nature that his real work began, in defining the aesthetic and even the spiritual import of his observations. In his journal, essays, and books, his distillations and syntheses became guiding exemplars for how "science" — the objective description — might become personalized knowledge, meaningful as aesthetic or spiritual experience.

In Thoreau's struggle to both observe and meditate on his own seeing, he offered us a new way of seeing the world. He made nature in Her minute details a source of reflection, and composed Concord's suburbs in a personal format, taking what he required to build up a picture of the world, and of himself within it. The individuality he espoused was the *sine qua non* of the entire project. In short, instead of objectivity's "view from nowhere," Thoreau proclaimed the primacy of precisely his own vision. The union of the study and appreciation of nature became a fundamental value for millions of Americans in the environmental movement, but it is also the abiding romantic lesson for how we might regard science in its broadest cultural meaning.

Thoreau was no scientist, at least not in any ordinary sense. But he was an astute student of science, and more fundamentally, epistemology. He found no easy resting place for observation, indeed, there is a deep tension in Thoreau's writings, one which reveals the swings he experienced as the biographer of Nature and as the autobiographer of his own relationship to that endeavor. Critics have noted that as *Walden* unfolds, the speaker as the self-creator of his environment, as evinced by the frequent appearance of "Thoreau's favorite pronoun, 'I,'" gradually yields, as the text proceeds, to the cluster of "Walden," "pond(s)," and the various nominal and adjectival forms of "wild" in which the self lives (Buell, 1995, p. 122). This inverse relationship of the autonomous-self and the self-in-the-world reflects the thematic intent of the narrative and reflects, in perhaps a crude measure, the complex structure of the book. As Thoreau reaches out to nature, and to his audience, we see him pushing aside the narcissistic mirror, and the inordinate "I" becomes contextualized. This represents the to and fro of Thoreau's struggle of defining his very personhood. To the extent that he remains stuck in his self-awareness, the separated self is always peering at

nature rather than being truly connected to Her. This is then, despite his extraordinary success as a writer, ultimately the 'failure' inherent to the 'autonomous-self,' which in its various epistemological projects can never fulfill the experience of that other 'self-in-the-world.' This is the metaphysical tension he always faced, a stress always felt at the core of his writings.

In addition, on Thoreau's view, the world must be filtered through a personal aesthetic and complex grammar of meaning. This personalization of experience indeed was a 'problem,' for in the insistence on maintaining his personalized view of the world, he dangerously skirted the black hole of solipsism. He precariously walked an indefinite border between radical subjectivity and public objectivity. On the one hand, he was not a subjectivist that sought to solely stamp the world with a private constellation of feelings and moral attitude, and he enthusiastically embraced the challenge of knowing the world in some objective sense. Yet, on the other hand, he rebelled against the ascendent positivism of his age, and instead insisted on the imprimatur of personalizing experience. This is the key characteristic of Thoreau's nature writing, and we best understand it as his on-going effort to achieve a precarious balance: Enchant nature, imbue it with significance and human value, yet employ 'objectivity' which dictates a neat divide between self and other, between our subjectivism and the world. Thoreau's genius was to successfully follow this narrow divide — one informed by both a search for an objective accounting of what was out there and a self-consciousness drawn taut by the poetic and spiritual tension of making that world humanly meaningful.³

The balance between confinement and maintaining a self-aware identity which was always tested against some version of objective reality — natural and social — represented a pervasive epistemological challenge, indeed arising from the very metaphysics of a self-conscious awareness of ourselves as aliens in the world. And to whatever extent he might have engaged the world and written of it, the solipsism issue simply would not go away, always hanging over Thoreau and threatening to envelop him in an exclusive universe of his own making. In short, the danger of asserting the self as constitutive of its world is the peril of constructing a world only known to that self. Of course, Thoreau was no solipsist, and at the same time, however, he was relatively isolated as the result of the perspectivism that arose from his radically personalized view of the world.

In the end, Thoreau concludes after much agonizing that the world is known ultimately in relationship to oneself. He is constantly inquiring about the world, which is understood not by some 'objective' standard or shared public knowledge, but in his own terms. The knowing subject perceives in many formats, but ultimately Thoreau accepts that it is only what he knows as a self-generating, self-referential 'knowing' subject that "satisfies" him. Thoreau's epistemology is in full service to his ethical metaphysics, where the knowing self is guided by a moral project to seek meaning and beauty.

On Seeing

The rise of 19th century positivism challenged Thoreau's vision, and, indeed, much of his work may be seen as a reaction to a new scientific ethos (Tauber 2001). A dissociated self was demanded in order to study natural phenomena — separated, or better, distanced from intimate human involvement. From an objective perspective, projection of the self contaminated the process of attaining scientific knowledge. The unleashing of Descartes' mind-body dualism bequeathed the dilemma of how to render whole that which is broken in the division between self and world. The Cartesian method imparts a tension, for while dissecting the world into parts it offers no ready means for those elements to become reintegrated. Further, the epistemological standing of the observer is ambiguous — how indeed does the observer *know*? The Rationalists and the Empiricists thrashed out this question for almost two centuries preceding Thoreau's birth, and while Kant offered a synthesis in the *a priori*, the question was never put to rest. The Romantic response required a radical reformulation, which took various forms, but unifying them all was the free admission of Imagination into the inquiry of Nature, and Thoreau was a Romantic, in every sense.

The issue for him was not *subjectivity* in the confining, prejudicial, solipsistic sense, but rather the demand of processing experience from the objective parlance of science to *meaningful* experience:

There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be *subjective*. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some

human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science. (May 5, 1854, Journal VI, 1906, 1962, pp. 236-7)

And this was to be a celebration of life in its fullest deployment, a moral mandate:

The man most of science is the man most alive, whose life is the greatest event. Senses that take cognizance of outward things merely are of no avail. It matters not how far you travel...but how much alive you are. (Ibid.)

He sought to retain the youthful freshness of experience, for only in that domain would the full significance and beauty of knowledge remain fresh and most intimate: "I suspect that the child plucks its first flower with an insight into its beauty and significance which the subsequent botanist never retains." (Thoreau, February 5, 1852, Journal Vol. 4, 1992, p. 329) Unlike the child, we must self-consciously pursue a regained innocence. The question that remains, of course, is that possible? Thoreau by his example showed us it was.

Thoreau's world was constructed without the conceit of cold objectivity. He was a deliberate 'poet' and unabashedly practiced his art, enthralled by the beauty and order of Nature. So at one level, he appreciated beauty and this was an end in itself. But there is a second agenda afoot: The world truly was there only to the extent that he might *see it*. The appreciation of nature is one way of experiencing, but more deeply is the awareness that it is the *responsibility* and *capacity* of the observer to see. In this regard, the character of the individual is radically determinative of what is there. Thoreau correctly diagnosed the inability to find concordance amongst the citizens of Concord in the simple act of looking as due to their different respective attentions:

Objects are concealed from our view not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because there is no intention of the mind and eye toward them. We do not realize how far and widely, or how near and narrowly, we are to look. The greater part of the phenomena of nature are for this reason, concealed to us all our lives. (November 4, 1858, Journal XI, 1906, 1962, p. 285)

Thus what objects "one person will see...are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different" (ibid.). Nature's reality is not at stake; but our ability to know that world is solely dependent on our ability to observe and comprehend. As he wrote, "Who can say what is? He can only say *how he sees*" (December 2, 1846, Journal 2, 1984, p. 355). In this sense Thoreau was much indebted to Kant's distinction of noumena and phenomena, and in some sense it is an orthodox epistemological standard: "As for the reality no man sees it - but some see more and some less" (Thoreau, December 2, 1846, Journal 2, 1984, p. 355).

Thoreau's deliberations came just at the moment in our culture when the challenge of positivism and its most jarring effects were first felt. God's funeral was well underway, as was subjectivity's, at least for awhile. He chose to champion the individual's subjective knowledge, and the sanctity of personal experience at the expense of this newer form of objectivity. I doubt that even he understood how late to the stage he had come. By mid-nineteenth century, under the sway of positivism, the scientist was increasingly portrayed as vanishing, absorbed by the scientific instrument or machine. A simple report of data ostensibly would eliminate the subjective element, and thus offer a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986). The completely detached observer, one independent of subjective foibles and prejudices, would derive conclusions from "somewhere else." Although this view slowly evolved from the birth of modern science, during the 1840s this new form of objectivity — "scientific objectivity" — quickly became an idealized form of knowledge and was quickly applied to the so-called human sciences, sociology and psychology, with monumental effects. As we peer at Thoreau from our own vantage only a few generations removed, we see, perhaps more clearly than he could, the scope of this revolution in thought, and, in some sense, his innocence of this future enables us to appreciate his response still fresh in its hope and vigor (Tauber 2001).

Perhaps more than other contemporaneous artists, philosophers, psychologists, physiologists, and historians, Thoreau took steps to drive his epistemology towards a particular vision of himself. Indeed, he subsumed his epistemology to a moral orientation, in fact, an ethical imperative that was particularly eloquent and perhaps even unique for his time. The ethics of what he believed was required to be an individual drove his quest to know...and thereby find meaning. This drive, more than any particular

political or social agenda has established his example for us. His moral venture was a mandate of seeing — one to be developed, exercised, and pursued as the act of self-actualization. He would both break the confines of solipsism and in the process assert the authority of the self to know his or her world.

Emerson and Thoreau in Our Time

While the protégé read nature to discover correspondence and meaning, Thoreau distanced himself from Emerson by further extending the continuum of his encounters with nature — empirical and mystical — well beyond the aspirations of his teacher. On this interpretation, merger itself, the attainment of a self-less self, becomes Thoreau's abiding aspiration. Emerson was more content to contemplate nature and receive its spiritual messages. Emerson himself referred to Thoreau as Pan, a man whose intimacy with the natural, both as explorer and mystic, far exceeded Emerson's own efforts or accomplishments in these arenas. These differences duly noted, we must understand that it was Emerson who offered Thoreau the philosophical structure for the agenda he eventually pursued — "to apply transcendental ideas, to bring them to the test of living" (Paul 1958, p. 16). In short, theirs was a happy accident of complementarity.

Irrespective of their particular contributions, in the 20th century, Thoreau's agenda and style proved more popular than Emerson's. Thoreau's ascendancy may be accounted for by a muted religiosity and a more active engagement of *knowing* nature. In the senses described above, his natural history studies were both an aesthetic pursuit and one heavily influenced by the imperative to know objectively. Thoreau achieved celebrity in both venues by example and by transmitting his experience in exuberant prose. His concerns in *Walden*, "I fear chiefly that my expression may not be *extra-vagant enough*" (1971, p. 324), would hardly have worried Emerson. And, indeed, Thoreau captured the American imagination in our own century far more effectively than did his mentor to become the seer of the Sierra Club and all its kindred.

Nature was not redeemed so much as transformed in an on-going creation of Thoreau's imagination, and it is this vision of the natural world — specifically answering the Emersonian challenge that each of us might also create a unique and profound relationship with Nature — that remains

Thoreau's abiding example, one that Emerson might well have been proud of, but who for many reasons failed to recognize. I have dwelled on Thoreau, because in the end I believe he more effectively demonstrated Emerson's program, albeit perhaps in too pagan a fashion for even a defrocked minister to admire, and transmitted his message by living its precepts more than contemplating them. Today, fairly or not, Emerson appears effete and detached, while Thoreau, the day laborer, eccentric naturalist, political radical, and social outcast is established as an icon of American individualism. But more to the point, it is Thoreau, not Emerson, who became the Pied Piper leading America's children into the wilds of an uncorrupted state of nature.⁴ Proclaiming an anthem to the simple life, the common man, the goodness of man in nature, our Rousseau took the moral high ground and has yet to relinquish it.

But Thoreau is not only a prince of the flower children. Environmentalism in its many forms is much indebted to his inspiration. I will not attempt to even summarize that influence, but will note only the continued popularity of the Thoreauvian confessional, the hallmark of a transfigured natural religion originating in Emersonian idealism. Thoreau was a consummate practitioner of what has become a distinctive genre, the naturalist vignette. Highly individualized and personal, the facts of the case follow Emerson's prescription of symbolized correspondence of spiritual meaning, framed by the natural and translated into a personal, aesthetic experience. The method is introspection; the end point is signification; the process is self-defining. While shedding the transcendental baggage, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Henry Beston, Sue Hubbell, Erazim Kohak, Roderick Haig-Brown, and myriad other American writers and their countless readers have followed Thoreau into nature, where the observer takes on a certain primacy, so that the self-consciousness of seeing becomes an object of scrutiny and delight in itself. In the process, the self is implicitly asserted as a central focus of interest, albeit in the engagement of the world. This address is all part of the larger challenge of environmental interpretation, which requires us to rethink our assumptions about the very nature of the knowing self and its relationship to the world. This issue points to the central question of man's relation to nature, or rather to Nature as a construction (Evernden 1992) or man's 'place' (Garber 1991) in nature, which is also a construction, matters very much in the center of current discourse.

I believe that the reasons for Thoreau's still lively popularity reside in large measure in his ability to inspire us to probe nature as he did, namely to seek meaning and beauty in a world that increasingly has become disenchanted by science and a sterile materialism. Thoreau's project, the one our culture seems to have endorsed so heartily, is at heart the Emersonian assertion that meaning is to be found in nature, but does so with an enthusiasm of visceral encounter. Accordingly, if we are, in fact, essentially "wild," then our core identities possess a direct correspondence with the natural, which, if tapped, will serve to vitalize us.⁵ Thoreau took this one step further, for in celebrating the wild as a value *sui generis*, he made a moral claim against a culture he regarded as corrupted by a mercantilism in its organization and a positivism in its assessment of knowledge. So while Emerson serenely pondered the tranquil sea, Thoreau set sail and took his readings directly from its waters. Emerson had determined the agenda, and Thoreau, acutely and articulately, responded in his own distinctive voice. Thoreau thus became Emerson's emissary to our time.

An obvious telos of self-definition guides their entire enterprise. One reads Nature not to glorify God, to pay homage to his creation, or to seek atonement. The religious intent is directed to only one of the discarded Christian mandates, namely the saving of his own soul, not for a heavenly paradise, but for a heaven here on earth. Accordingly, in the process of exploring our relationship to nature we define ourselves, indeed, we are vitalized in that encounter.

In seeking meaning, Christian revelation thus has been translated into a personal naturalized religion, one based on correspondence that serves as the means of signifying nature and spiritualizing ourselves. Perhaps few today would advocate the particulars of Emersonianism, but the general program still commands broad appeal. And I believe the importance of Thoreau lies not solely as an early spokesman of our contemporary environmentalism, but more deeply in how he expressed a self-consciousness about the self in its natural and moral placement. Their respective queries about the nature of selfhood in the particular context of intimate engagement with nature represents an important response to the general Romantic quandary that they faced, and which we still ponder. I am referring to the problem of self-consciousness that will not abide any respite

from its own relentless self-scrutiny. Emerson perceived the penalty we pay for our acute self-consciousness, as he noted in a public lecture in 1837 entitled "The Present Age:"

It is alleged that the habit of the cultivated intellect of the present day is reflection, not instinct. Ours is distinguished from the Greek and Roman and Gothic ages and all the periods of childhood and youth by being the age of the second thought. The golden age is gone and the silver is gone — the blessed eras of unconscious life, of intuition, of genius....The ancients were self-united. We have found out the difference of outer and inner. They described. We reason. They acted. We philosophize. They described what happened. We what is thought and felt. (*Early Lectures*, Vol. 2, p. 168)

But there is an antidote, and it is the one of self-knowledge and self-reliance proclaimed by Thoreau at the end of *Walden*, where he addresses us as an Aaron speaking for Moses: In his admonition, we must first acknowledge that "We know not where we are," (1971, p. 332),⁶ and then must garner the wherewithal to chart one's course to "find ourselves and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (1971, p. 171).

So the response of Emerson and Thoreau to the anxiety of alienation was a creative one, an embrace of its challenge and a trust in their own resourcefulness — spiritual, aesthetic, existential, and psychological. On this view, Emerson and Thoreau are psalmists of American success and optimism, as they marshaled this spiritual buoyancy and made it their own. They were the prophets of an American natural religion, one attendant to un-relinquished spiritual yearnings, and voiced in a particular aesthetic mode. This vision, celebrating nature's aesthetic and spiritual bounty, remain their enduring heritage. Composers of America the Beautiful, a hymn to Nature, we sing its verses in no small measure because they taught us how to see the natural world through their Transcendental lenses.

Notes:

1. I have liberally borrowed from Jeffrey Duncan (1973) for this summary of Emerson's metaphysics. The material related specifically to Thoreau's epistemology is largely gleaned from earlier work (Tauber 2001).

2. Allow me to illustrate:

Sometimes...I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise to noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. (*Walden* 1971, pp. 111-112)

This is a fecund passage for my theme: Thoreau reports a reverie, a mystical state where time is suspended, only to be awakened by intrusions. He thrived in these states, achieving both a peace and deep knowledge that renewed him in the "Oriental contemplation" that the Hindu mystics taught him was laudable. Time's suspension is completely confluent with Nature, which knows no time, for while we understand the passing of seasons and hours, their marking as *time* is cognitive, a category of the mind. So in adopting an animal's ignorance of time, Thoreau celebrates total envelopment within nature, exemplified by man's obliviousness of the hour. And finally, this reverie is true to Thoreau's highest ethical commitment of achieving total integration with Nature. Although these glimpses of merger with nature's flux only are fleeting, they sustain him. After all, to have a vision is to possess an orientation, a philosophy, a guidance - and for Thoreau, a fulfillment.

3. Thoreau's primary aesthetic enterprise was to capture the experiences he gleaned from nature in a literary mode that became the naturalist vignette (Buelle 1995). Thus "the aesthetic" was a two-fold endeavor — a primary revelry in the beauty and splendor of nature, and a secondary "capture" of that experience in his writings. Heavily indebted to earlier romantics, Thoreau regarded his mature poetic faculty as a particularly well-developed ability to see the organic character of nature, specifically its dynamic quality (a la Goethe) and its universal principles of individuation (a la Coleridge). For Thoreau's readings and understanding of art principles, see Peck (1990, pp. 49ff.), and for a fuller discussion of Thoreau's relation to Goethe, Coleridge, and more generally his aesthetic epistemology, see Tauber, 2001.

4. Thoreau's popularity coincides with the growth of American environmentalism, which has occurred in two waves, the first shortly after the turn of the last century, and the second in the past 30 years. Interestingly, Jonathan Bishop, writing as late as 1964, observed (correctly for his own period): "[A] modern reader would have more difficulty than Emerson in believing, for one thing, that the prototypical experience of the whole man begins with communion with nature. The very notion seems as antique as the pastoral genre in which it was traditionally expressed. And pastoral, in life as in letters, seems not merely old-fashioned, but debilitating, immature, a matter for vacations, not a foundation for grown-up experience." (Bishop 1964, p. 22)

5. Like Emerson, Thoreau wished to establish the relation of an autonomous self with its cosmos, but unlike his mentor, he discerned his core of being and source of creativity and vitality not as spirit, but as raw nature, as "the Wild." Thoreau transfigured what remained an abstract idea of a core self into a visceral one, and thereby naturalized the core. Indeed, by tapping into his own 'wildness' as opposed to 'spirit,' Thoreau softens the spirit-matter dichotomy so important to Emerson's system, which reflects I think the differing agendas of the two men.

6. These words reiterate Thoreau's catharsis on Mt. Ktaadn (September, 1846), where, in response to witnessing the titanic and cold awesomeness of nature, he penned, "Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?" and echo Emerson's more sober opening lines in "Experience:"

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. (1983, p. 27)

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