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The Philosopher as Prophet: The Case of Emerson and Thoreau

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Abstract: *Emerson articulated his metaphysics of selfhood within a theistic framework; Thoreau reconfigured his ideas as a mystical pantheism. In this latter form, Transcendentalism offered twentieth century Americans a new religious sensibility based on an intimacy with nature, which became a spiritual and aesthetic resource for personal fulfillment.*

It is said to be the age of the first person singular. (Emerson 1963, 70)

Introduction

It has been a bit over a century since Nietzsche declared God's death, but he hardly could have expected religion's demise too. God may have had His funeral, but the coffin seems to have been empty. The spectrum stretching from religious fundamentalism to atheism is filled with various religious sects, each testifying to the persistent appeal of Americans' belief of an ever-present divinity. While the character of the divine remains in dispute, the search for spirituality and its expression remains an enduring characteristic of multicultural American life. Of these various responses, a new paganism, in the form of environmentalism -- a greening ethos and an

aesthetic wilderness -- has assumed a growing religious presence. A source of meaning and signification, the communing with Nature has filled a spiritual lacuna for millions of Americans. I wish to explore here one of the key philosophical sources of this worship of nature and demonstrate how it developed from a metaphysics, not of God, but of the self. Indeed, if we understand Nietzsche's observation as a radical displacement of the authority of morality from revealed divine law to personal responsibility, then concomitant to that ethical re-alignment is a metaphysical adjustment of the self in its World. The religious expression of that new definition was provocatively and successfully articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Arising from a hodgepodge of neo-Platonism, Vedanticism, German idealism, and Unitarianism (Richardson 1995; Versluis 1993, 55ff.), Emerson placed the self at a new religious fulcrum.

In an increasingly secularized world, shorn from a Judeo-Christian tradition, the nineteenth century witnessed a struggle for Man's soul. Emerson responded by finding divinity in the individual. Emerson's thought revolves around the problem of selfhood, principally its definition in relation to spirit. He faced two principle challenges: an age increasingly doubtful about articulating the relationship, if any, between Creator and Man, and second, the new primacy claimed for individual autonomy. Emerson

responded by offering a new theology of selfhood. ¹In 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, 90-2; see also 112ff.). In this respect Emerson may be regarded as an exemplar of his age, distinguished by a singular achievement: He presented a philosophical scaffolding for a religious sensibility responsive to the complex cultural forces defining a new social and political moral agent. In short, Emerson, proselytized the “divine sufficiency of the individual” (Parrington 1927, 1987, 390), and thereby placed individualism within a new religious context.

Although Emerson, in 1832 (at age 29), shifted from delivering sermons to writing essays — moving from a religious orientation to ostensibly a philosophical one — he continued to ask the same essential questions that were first formulated in an ecclesiastical context. While it is difficult to separate Emerson’s philosophical musings from his religious inquiry, he emerges as a metaphysician struggling to apply a non-ecclesiastical philosophy to a religious problem. ²Much as Descartes had done three centuries earlier, Emerson found his relationship to God, and ultimately the character of his own personhood, inextricably intertwined with self-consciousness. The claims of moral and epistemological agency, the very status of the self, coincides with Western consciousness, and cannot be regarded as an issue unique to Emerson’s, or our own, era. Indeed, Emerson’s contemporaries generated particularly acute insights about the elusive nature of selfhood and the relationship of individuals to cosmic nature.

During this period, subjectivity suffered repeated assaults as new claims for objectivity discredited personal knowledge as untrustworthy interpretation (Tauber 2001). Romantic subjectivism itself discovered the limits of its own pursuit. As Romanticism initiated its own exploration of identity, the self soon lost its boundaries. Eventually the very question of an entity that we might designate ‘the Self’ became highly problematic, and the authenticity of such an entity challenged (Taylor 1989). What began in the Romantic period as a trial of self-examination, culminated in post-romantic modernism with a fractured self, and in postmodernism with only an empty ‘space’ where personal identity once resided (Tauber 1994). We are the inheritors of this emptying of personal identity, and we now speak of the self’s “indeterminacy.” When the subject is “de-centered,” no longer an origin or organizing principle, it becomes only the contingent product of multiple historical,

social and psychological forces. Ethics similarly deconstructs into communal manners and mores, cultural products composed in a morally undefined, and non-definable, universe. In parallel, the religious holds no foundational claims, leaving Man to fashion belief on individual terms of meaning, historically contingent and socially constructed. Nietzsche’s slogan, “God is dead!” may be strident, but in emphatically shifting the source of meaning to Man, Nietzsche, having read Emerson carefully (Stack 1992), brought the American’s lessons to a clear conclusion: Facing a nihilistic abyss, Man’s only option is his own self-reliance.

Having lost a revelatory theology and an authoritative religion, Emerson’s challenge was how to respond to nihilism. This was a central problem of the Romantics (beginning with Fichte [Rosen 1969; Gillespie 1995]), where a world radically constituted by consciousness allows no place for meaning beyond the individual’s own endowment to know, even to design, his own world. Without spiritual foundations, value, signification, and purpose dissolve into the plenum of personal experience and self-actualization, leaving Man alone to define his universe. For Emerson this was not a cause for despair, but rather an opportunity to create meaning. What most clearly separates Emerson — from Nietzsche and later postmoderns — is the ultimate transcendental assertion that the self does not reside alone in isolation, but rather cannot escape its fundamental relation to the Other. So, despite the radical autonomy of the self, a shared divinity with the world-at-large brings a threatening alienation into a spiritual alliance with the Whole.

Emerson thus squarely faced the nihilistic challenge, elaborating a religious and philosophical idealism centered on the self. Despite grave personal doubts, he responded by defining himself in relation to nature, where he sought not only evidence of God’s presence, but a way to discern value and meaning of lives secularized and seemingly isolated from, or perhaps deaf to, the divine. 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 should embrace nature as an expression of the spiritual and the aesthetic; and finally that, because the sublime is constitutive to nature, an essentially religious sensibility serves as our basic link to Her. Emerson was not the originator of these ideas, but he was their chief American expositor, and his influence remains a potent force in American culture.

In this paper, I summarize Emerson’s metaphysics of nature and the self, describe one course by which his thought has been transmitted to our own

time, and finally conclude with a comment about the continued presence and importance of American Transcendentalism.

Emerson's Metaphysics of Nature

The questions that informed Emerson's early development as a preacher re-appeared in his incarnation as a secular essayist. Indeed, his most important works were written in the throes of a religious crisis, and his philosophy is permeated with questions of the spirit. 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. Elements of each will become apparent as I sketch the Emersonian composite.³

In his short manifesto, *Nature*, published in 1836, Emerson outlines his key precepts of Man's relation to Nature, and from this metaphysical statement we can trace virtually all of his later work. For Emerson, like so many of his romantic contemporaries, nature was the necessary expression of the divine (Emerson 1970, 71). He conceived the universe as composed of soul, or spirit, and nature. Spirit is life itself, a projection of God as *natura naturans* – the creative life force which sustains and reproduces life. Spirit is transformed according to physical laws, and projected into matter as *natura naturata*. Both the activity of natural forms and the laws of their activity perfectly express the supreme mind, and, indeed, "nature is a metaphor of the mind" (ibid., 21). Thus to know the divine, Emerson rejects materialism and seeks a form of idealism, which grants primacy to the spirit while acknowledging the objective reality of the world.

Although Emerson distrusts sense impressions, he cannot accept his own suggestion that perhaps nature is simply an "apocalypse of the mind" (Emerson 1971a, 29). In fact, in adopting a Kantian perspective, Emerson holds that nature is a phenomenon, an object of experience, but to the discerning eye, one imbued with spirituality. Our role, as knowing creatures, is to articulate nature by our own witnessing of it. Emerson asserts a teleological natural religion, where nature exists not for its own sake but as a means to an end: "It is the great organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it" (ibid., 37). This entire enterprise of witnessing is designed to 'emancipate us.' At root, Emerson is still preaching, to free us not from sin, but from our spiritual isolation. Nature, if properly engaged, becomes the means to our personal salvation, the encounter by which meaning and significance

emerges.

Like Fichte's radical assertion of 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 (Emerson 1979b, 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" (Emerson 1971a, 28). 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 "reading" of nature. The attained insight thus depends on human imagination and effort. 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. (Emerson 1971a, 44)

The Emersonian Self

Having outlined how Emerson prescribed that we should engage nature, let me now turn to his conception of the knowing agent. As *Nature* is the ur-text for the transcendental description of nature, the essay, "Experience," best captures Emerson's conception of the self. Written approximately eight

years after *Nature* and published in his second series of *Essays*, he famously describes how experience, all experience including the terrible loss of his first-born, is ultimately disconnected from the core of his being.

People grieve and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is, to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers. Was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, -- no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If to-morrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me, -- neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous.... Our relations to each other are oblique and casual. (Emerson 1983f, 29-30)

For Emerson, there is a core self isolated and inured from a world that it calmly and imperturbably surveys, watching another more superficial layer of his personal experience of life. The core identity as formulated in "Experience," is perfectly consistent with the one depicted in *Nature*, where the all-seeing eye surveys nature in perfect harmony with its object, integrating spirit and cosmos oblivious to a subject-object divide. In "Experience," this same contentless self detachedly surveys Emerson's own anguish. In both essays, Emerson describes an essential core of selfhood that exists in communion with the rest of nature, unawares of its unique identity (*Nature*) – a metaphysical assertion – or shockingly disjointed from human experience ("Experience") – an existential observation. This is a remarkable claim, and putting

aside any psychological considerations, it presents a schema that explains both man's isolation from nature and the basis for his integration.

The Emersonian self is layered: An 'outer' stratum experiences and self-reflects—aware of itself, the world, and a perplexing isolated island of self identity, the core self. This inner self is incapable of absorbing experience and remains epistemologically inert, which allows Emerson to place the self of consciousness, of human relationships and experiences superficial to a deeper core. This core self is obscure, virtually hidden from direct encounter, it remains enigmatic in the extreme. Its silence is disturbingly aloof and leaves even its bearer with precious little connection to its own inner workings. It remains as a distinctive expression of certain existential truths concerning the essential isolation of our being and the jealous guarding of our vitality.⁴ But the interesting aspect of this construction is not so much its existential status, but rather its metaphysical appeal. When Emerson writes, "souls never touch their objects," he is making more than an epistemological claim: Not only is human consciousness separated from nature and thus impelled to read her as one would read a text, we live at a remove from the heart of our own selfhood. The core self is the limit of self-consciousness, the place where reflection ends and our being is, but it is also the domain of our inner divinity, the source of the knowing ego's metaphysical sensibility. In short, we know God, because the core self partakes of Spirit, of the divine.⁵

For Emerson, this spiritual nucleus serves as the essential link between ourselves and the cosmos in which we exist, because it is part of it. This connection is through spirit, which not only is expressed in nature, but constitutes the core of a human being. When Emerson reiterates Luke's Biblical claim, "The highest revelation is that God is in every man" (Emerson 1964a, 84), he means this quite literally: "The foundations of man are not in matter [nature], but in spirit" (Emerson 1971a, 42). So while we, sentient, self-conscious, knowing creatures wish to engage spirit and be nurtured by it, the deepest reaches of the self has no such yearning; it is neutral to our worldly aspirations, satisfied like the seas and clouds and mountains to simply *be*.

For Emerson, humans only assume their full humanity when spiritually cognizant, and redemption is achieved in recognizing that spirit and allowing it full play. He proclaims near the end of *Nature* that

the reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited from himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of

the spirit. (Emerson 1971a, 43)

And that unification begins in recognizing this core identity of spirit, this immutable essence of identity, which confers both human uniqueness and the connection with the unified One:

the Spiritual Being, does not build up nature around us but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power. Who can set the bounds to the possibilities of man? (Emerson 1971a, 38)

Indeed, self-reliance, the credo we associate with rugged American individualism, is, in fact, for Emerson not egoism, but reliance on God: "if he [man] rests at last on the divine soul, I see not how it can be otherwise" (Emerson 1979c, 182). But not reliance in some passive "so be God's will," but in the recognition that our own freed being is a manifestation of our own divinity.⁷ Repeatedly, Emerson asserts that reliance should be placed in that which is his ultimate cause. When Emerson, in a famous line from "Circles" speaks of "cause and effect are two sides of one fact" (Emerson 1979c, 186), he describes the two-fold character of human divinity. On the one hand, the divine resides within us and is, indeed, the basis for our discovery of Spirit, and this carries a moral lesson: Do not mistakenly assert self-reliance as some kind of autonomous, or freed, effect, and thus break the divine unified cause-effect relationship which unites you to the eternal.

And what is God? We cannot say but we see clearly enough. We cannot say, because he is the unspeakable, the immeasurable, the perfect — but we see plain enough in what direction it lies. First we see plainly that the All is in Man....That is, there is no screen or ceiling between our heads & the infinity of space/heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the Soul where man the effect ceases & God the cause begins. The walls are taken away; we lie open on one side to all the deeps of spiritual nature, to all the attributes of God. Justice we see and know; that is of God. Truth we see & know, that is of God. Love, Freedom, Power, these are of God. For all these & much more there is a general nature in which they inhere or of which they are phases and this is Spirit. It is essentially vital.

The love that is in me, the justice, the truth can never die & that is all of me that will not die. All the rest of me is so much death [--] my ignorance, my vice, my [bodily] corporeal pleasure....And the soul affirms with the same assurance I shall live forever, as it affirms, Justice shall be forever....Again; because the All is in Man we know nothing arbitrary, nothing alien shall take place in the Universe, nothing contrary to the Nature in us. (Emerson 1965, 229-30)

If man fails to accept this essential union, Emerson says alienation follows. The finite human, the experiencing person, is as much a "stranger in nature as we are aliens from God," (Emerson 1971a, 39). The antidote to our alienation is a new religious consciousness, one based on a self-awareness of our own essential divine nature, its correspondence with the divinity imbued in nature, and finally, in that discovery, our placement in God's work. Ultimately, our self-development is an expression of seeking that cognizance; self-aggrandizement celebrates the potential of our mission and the centrality of its importance as an instantiation of the divine.⁸

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" (Emerson 1883e, 306) and relishes the rare moments of heightened lucidity that comes in recognizing divine presence (ibid., 308). Emerson 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 boardinghouse. 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 (Emerson 1964b, 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

unison 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., 171)

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 philosophy, 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 detail that rich story here, but I will suggest its contours by showing how the Emersonian program was promoted by his most interesting student.

Thoreau, the Disciple

Although acknowledged as the seer of nineteenth-century American intellectuals, Emerson's voice today often sounds distant to modern ears. He is often summarily dismissed by those quickly distracted by his tortuous, involuted prose and quaint romanticism. Indeed, Emerson, an American Moses had his Aaron (Exodus 4:10-17), Henry David Thoreau, to deliver his message. To the extent Emerson is esoteric and oblique, Thoreau appears to us clear and readily accessible. The muted religiosity, the enchantment with sensual experience, the extravagant claims for individuality, and the eccentric character of the younger man have combined to put Thoreau squarely into our present focus, while Emerson recedes as a more obscure resource. Beyond the rhetorical differences, an intriguing tension exists between Emerson and Thoreau. On the one hand, Emerson offered Thoreau the philosophical scaffolding for *Walden*. After all, Emerson is key author of a distinctive American claim about Man's relation to nature and related conceptions of selfhood. On the other hand, Thoreau presented a variation of that vision

which another century would find conducive to its own pursuits and concerns. He took transcendental principles and re-configured them into his own fold. So let me begin my excursion from Emerson's library by following the path of his most earnest, if not conflicted disciple, Thoreau.

It is difficult to explicate Thoreau's appeal, but two themes are prominent. The first is an intimate engagement with nature, not as Emerson typically contemplated the natural, usually from his porch sitting in a chair, but by active pursuit of nature's hidden mysteries. Thoreau examined Concord's forests and lakes in intimate detail, filling multiple notebooks 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. This empirical intensity clearly separates them, but their methodological differences are not the cardinal distinction, for Thoreau's nature studies followed an Emersonian ideal: Every empirical fact was a potential spiritual fact. The deeper separation occurs at the level of their respective spiritual quests: Simply, Emerson was a theist, Thoreau a pantheist.

Emerson's *theism* as contrasted to Thoreau's *mystical pantheism* are only shorthand labels to describe complex differences in their respective religious orientations. Given the risk of oversimplification, what may be fairly emphasized is that while each shared interests in Hindu literature, Emerson was intellectually engaged whereas Thoreau was captivated by it to the point of actively aspiring to an enlightened state. For example, as Thoreau wrote:

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. (Thoreau 1971, 111-112)

This passage is distinctively Thoreauvian—a reverie, a mystical state, a peace and a deep knowledge that renewed him in the "Oriental contemplation." Inspired by Plotinus (Porte 1966, 166) and Hindu mystics (Versluis, 1993), Thoreau found his spiritual well-spring in rare moments of transcendence which

followed their example (Tauber 2001, 15-16; 32-33; 38-39). 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 conscious mind. So in adopting an animal's ignorance of time, Thoreau celebrates total envelopment within nature, exemplified by man's obliviousness of the hour. 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. The Transcendental discovery of the East is well-known, but Thoreau "was perhaps the first American to explore the non-theistic mode of contemplation that is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism" (Fields 1981, 63), and, indeed, he has been characterized as closer to a Buddhist priest than anyone else in mid-nineteenth-century America (Versluis 1993, 99).

Merger itself, the attainment of a self-less self, became Thoreau's abiding aspiration. Emerson had his mystical moments, e.g. "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I am all" (Emerson 1971a, 10), but these were not ecstatic as were Thoreau's, and perhaps more to the point, nature for Emerson included Man's (attempted) dominance, an idea completely alien to Thoreau. 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. This became a crucial difference, inasmuch as the twentieth century witnessed a burgeoning of interest in Eastern thought and mysticism generally as a bona fide personalized religiosity unencumbered with the strictures of falsifying intellectualisms or the conformity demanded by organized churches. The worship of nature coincided with the growing need to assert individual autonomy and expression. Thoreau addressed these religious needs by charting a pathway to a theology of the self -- one with ancient pagan roots in nature worship, but now spiced with Eastern flavors.

So, while we may be struck by Thoreau's observations of nature, these pale in comparison to his passion for contemplation, dream, memory, and trance. The message he 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 spiritual experience could not be so reported. He might refer to eternity, the celestial spheres, the ancient truths, Higher Laws, the divine, the Brahma, 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. (Thoreau 1980, 128)

Note, knowledge in any conventional sense is displaced by a Higher Knowledge attained by enlightenment. All those activities that qualify in the hierarchy of the natural and human sciences are decisively auxiliary to the ephemeral, elusive, 'unknowing' Beyond, which must be perceived through *sympathy*.¹¹

Thoreau's signal achievement was to move beyond the strictures of reason, to an answer so ingenious and fecund that I suspect it is still not fully appreciated: Instead of seeking a unifying Reason, instead of attempting to bridge a divide between ourselves and nature as Emerson had preached, he admonished that we should recognize that we *are* nature, or as he put it, we should acknowledge our own inner wildness (Tauber 2001, 177-87). In asserting that nature, the Wild, is within us, our mission is to discover and become intimate with a primitive essence, which connects us with the cosmos. The Wild, because of its very character, cannot be 'known,' that is, tamed or rationalized, and made a species of consciousness. All those modes of knowing that we must pursue are sorry residues of a primary knowing. In the Wild, Reason does not rule; it can, at best, only mediate. Nature is processed by the mind (an unknowable Kantian *noumenon*), and accordingly is experienced in myriad variants as a product of 'the Wild.' Thoreau, while committed to studying nature, understood the underlying philosophical conundrum of knowing and 'solved' this Kantian imbroglio by asserting that no essential divide separated Man and Nature, only one's self-consciousness, which may be overcome in mystical revelry. So while it is true that Thoreau's philosophical milieu was Idealism,¹² he reached

beyond Reason and its ideal to a realm of unprocessed experience, to a domain beyond ideas. In that formulation, he fundamentally re-framed Emersonian Transcendentalism and put his own stamp on a new religious sensibility. Aaron would not have dared such presumption. Perhaps the better Biblical model for Thoreau is Ezekiel, whose mystical visions and social tirades might well have inspired this latter day saint.

Thoreau contra Emerson

While *Walden* and *Nature* share the status of religious ur-texts, I wish to comment briefly on why the student eclipsed his teacher as an emissary to our own era. In one sense, Thoreau preached a more radical, and thus more provocative sermon:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, -- to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society, I wish to make an extreme statement. (1980, 93)

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,' and thereby transformed a spiritual core self into a visceral one. Indeed, by tapping into his own 'wildness' as opposed to 'spirit,' Thoreau both moved both against an intellectualism embedded in Emerson's theology and softened the spirit-matter dichotomy so important to Emerson's metaphysics. Nature was not redeemed so much as transformed in an on-going creation of Thoreau's imagination. 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, remains Thoreau's abiding example, one which his mentor Emerson might well have been proud of, but who for many reasons failed to recognize (Richardson 1986).

In the end, Thoreau more effectively demonstrated Emerson's program, albeit perhaps in too pagan a fashion for even a former minister, 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

uncontaminated state of nature, and he did so by coupling his mysticism to a political program of self-responsibility and self-assertion. This social character mirrored the religious one and thereby offered his congregants a more complete model of moral agency – political and religious. Proclaiming an anthem to the simple life, the common laborer, the goodness of man in nature, our Rousseau took the moral high ground and has yet to relinquish it.

Thoreau's voice resonates with modern criticisms of mass society's commercialism and depersonalization. Ironically, perhaps, this inner rigor was to be found beyond ourselves. But there is no contradiction: According to Thoreau, we are essentially 'wild,' and thus our core identities possess a direct correspondence with the natural. When this wild reservoir is tapped, it serves to vitalize us, and correspondingly, to the extent that we are separated from that vital source, we suffer. So, 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.¹⁴

Thoreau was more radical than Emerson, both politically and personally, and thus the student's views resonated with those committed to social and existential reform during the 1960s and 1970s, when he achieved his prominent standing in the pantheon. But Thoreau's importance as a social reformer and an early spokesman of environmentalism resides more deeply on his metaphysics of the self. His was a particular response to a common Romantic query, namely 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. (Emerson 1964b, 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*: In his admonition, we must first acknowledge that “We know not where we are (Thoreau 1971, 332), 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” (ibid., 171).

In the nineteenth century, this optimistic message (we are the masters of our own ship) signified how Americans embraced a trust in their own resourcefulness — spiritual, existential, and psychological. The triumph of a pioneer civilization made nineteenth-century Americans less God-fearing than a people celebrating God’s bounty and goodness. They looked about themselves and saw His splendor. Emerson and Thoreau marshaled this spiritual buoyancy and made it their own. On this view, these Transcendentalists are psalmists of American success and optimism, and for millions of Americans, they are their prophets.¹⁵

Transcendentalism Today

Thoreau’s confessional is the first of what has become a distinctive genre (Buelle 1995). Typically posed as a naturalist vignette, the narrative characteristically becomes a testament to placing Man in Nature for a spiritual communion with a higher order. Nature’s splendor combines aesthetic and mystical elements to generate a religious experience, one not necessarily directed towards God, but allowing the worshiper to be enveloped within a pantheistic universe and thereby enfolded within the cosmic order. Meaning focuses upon the unified experience of a sentient ego with a stream of time and place that knows no bounds and recognizes no divisions (Tauber 2001, 23-44). The method is introspection; the end point is signification; the process is self-defining. Numerous contemporary transcendental writers reiterate Thoreau’s spiritual angst and hope, and each places the observer in the center of a spiritual drama, where the self-consciousness of seeing becomes a self-reflexive exercise that must end with communion. Several religious themes dominate these texts, and I choose three writers, Annie Dillard, Erazim Kohak, and Edward Abbey, almost at random for illustration. Each has a religious commitment; each has a naturalist bent; each directly responds to Thoreau.

Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) is self-consciously Thoreauvian, from its shared structure of a four-season journal at a particular rustic site to its method of its metaphysical exploration. Like Thoreau she admits, “I am no scientist. I explore the neighborhood...to discover at least *where* it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can learn why”

(Dillard 1974, 11-2). And like Thoreau she focuses on nature’s splendor and seamless web of relations (ibid., 72-76), the elusive character of time (ibid., 77 ff.), and the mystery of self-consciousness (what she calls “the curse of the city” [ibid., 81]). She, like Thoreau, is at times overwhelmed by the cosmic drama of nature and admits, “I do not understand even what I can easily see” (ibid., 128). Observing the tiny details of the world around her, she concludes that none of God’s creatures are “in any real sense necessary per se to the world or to its creator. Nor am I” (ibid., 129). An existential crisis looms.

It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only home after all? Can it possibly be that I should move my anchor-hold to the side of a library? This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness. (ibid., 176)

But Dillard, like Thoreau atop Mt. Katahdin facing the same confusion (Thoreau 1972, 60-71), goes forward through acceptance to equanimity:

The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men, and who carries his vision of vastness and might around in his tunic like a live coal which neither burns nor warms him, but with which he will not part. (ibid., 270)

Dillard won the Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim*, which if nothing else attests to its public acceptance, and I cite it here because of the clarity in which it speaks to a religious sensibility. Specifically, she combines the Thoreauvian contemplation of nature with his Buddhist acceptance of the cosmic grandeur of which we are trivial witnesses. With that insight and acceptance, she affirms a religious truth: Just knowing our place, even approximately and incompletely, attests to our knowledge of God and His presence. There is no orthodoxy here; revelation is radically personal; God’s church is all about us and we must grasp the immediacy of the present to appreciate its

truths. These are Thoreauvian themes to the core, and more, they are now accepted testaments of an American faith widely prevalent in our culture.

A second component of Thoreau's prophecy pertains to recovering humane values from an increasingly hostile materialist culture. Kohak, despite his efforts to distance himself from Thoreau (primarily to abort a threatening solipsism), uses a clearing in the forest as a window into nature, and contemplates its signs and meanings to affirm the centrality of personal knowledge and the subjective perspective. A theologian and phenomenologist, Kohak draws on the entire Western philosophical tradition to make a most Thoreauvian observation:

Sensing the life of the forest around me, I think only a person wholly blinded and deafened, rendered insensitive by the glare and blare of his own devices, could write off that primordial awareness of the human's integral place in the cosmos as mere poetic imagination or as "merely subjective." The opposite seems far closer to the truth. It is "objective reality" ...that is in truth the product of one's subjective purposeful and strenuous activity, a construct built up in the course of an extended, highly sophisticated abstraction...Humans must suspend lived experience to produce the "scientific world view" of physics. Our direct awareness of nature as the meaningful context of our lives, by contrast, presents itself spontaneously, without a subject's efforts. If anything, it requires the very opposite: to suspend effort, to let be and listen, letting nature speak. (Kohak 1984, 6)

Following the Transcendentalists, Kohak argues that the fundamental issue is "not the nature of 'nature' but rather the place of the human in the cosmos" (ibid., 8) and like his predecessors he finds that man's relation to nature is continuous and harmonious (ibid., 7). From this metaphysical position, an ethical mandate emerges: "To recover the moral sense of our humanity, we would need to recover first the moral sense of nature" (ibid. 13). Thus Kohak, for moral reasons, seeks "to articulate the intrinsic structure of experienced reality rather than construct ideal explanatory schemata and to impose them upon nature" (ibid., 15). He does so by resuscitating American Personalism (Deats and Robb 1986):

"Person" is the most fundamental philosophical category....The person, as a moral subject, is the clearest instantiation of

meaningful being, at the intersection of being and meaning, of time and eternity. To speak of the world as "personal" means to conceive of it as structured in terms of relations best understood on the model of meaningful relations among persons. (Kohak 1984, 209)

The justification rests on a re-configuring the subjective and objective realities, to allow for

a radical opening of our life and thought to the world of others, human, animate, inanimate, in the integrity of its otherness and the meaningfulness of its being. It is what we have come to think of as the objective "outward" turn which leaves the subject an isolated alien, considering the world solely from without, an object of our doings, asking not for the inner rightness of its being but subsuming it high-handedly under the arbitrary categories of our cognitive and practical utility. When we so approach the world, each subject finds himself locked in the solitude of his own purposes, taking in nothing, imposing his will on others until he in his turn comes to see himself solely in terms of the surface of his own being. The inward reality of his own self then appears as an illusion, at best a "merely subjective" reflection of the putatively objective "public" reality. (ibid., 207)

Kohak clearly proclaims the second key tenet of the Transcendentalist religious thought, namely the legitimacy of subjectivity to know a world alienated by a scientific imperialism. His is a theological, albeit in philosophical garb, assertion: "The cosmos is not an accident, being is not time – and reality is not matter" (ibid., 202). Ultimately, reality for Kohak is, and is meaningful, only because of human subjectivity.

More briefly, I wish to mention how this intimate relationship to nature, which allows the full flourishing of our personhood, is linked to social reform, another characteristic preoccupation of the Transcendentalists. Abbey, whose radical green politics demands personal commitment to oppose the rape of nature for commercial exploitation, begins his own Thoreauvian reform writing from a similar starting point as his progenitor. Abbey goes to the desert

to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and the fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at

it and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism, in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock. (Abbey 1968, 6)

Once nature is sanctified and becomes the repository of man's deepest metaphysical identity, the protection of nature logically follows, for its own sake, as well as our own.

Environmental activism finds its spiritual source and rationale in mystical yearnings. This religious character of the Green Movement in large measure explains its ideological intensity, which, summarily, is a program

not opposed to mankind but only to man-centeredness, anthropocentricity, the opinion that the world exists solely for the sake of man; not to science, which means simply knowledge, but to science misapplied, to the worship of technique and technology, and to that perversion of science properly called scientism. (Abbey 1968, 244)

Beginning with the Transcendentalist credo, these political guidelines seek to attain a particular humane vision of civilization. Integration with the cosmos addresses Man's deepest desire to find his place in the universe, or more specifically, the meaning and significance of an individual's fleeting moment in time. If that spiritual quest requires an increased sensitivity to, and an understanding of, nature's sublimity, then humans have an ethical obligation to respect our greater domain. From that point, twentieth century environmentalism drew the political conclusions: The centrality of Western culture's dominance of nature must be curbed, and the reliance on a science exclusively in the employ of dominance, as opposed to respectful co-existence, must be redirected. And so a social reform program was born, and like many before it, a religious insight directs its efforts.

Conclusion

In closing, I return to this essay's epigram, Emerson's observation that his age was preoccupied with the self. Our own era is similarly marked, but with

quite a different supporting context. Be that as it may, with these set of issues we finally come to the root of the Transcendentalists' continuing presence. An obvious *telos* of self-definition guides their entire enterprise. One need not read Nature 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 the human 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 renewed in that encounter. In seeking meaning, Christian revelation thus has been translated into a personal naturalized religion, one based on the assertion of our own subjectivity, which allows a means of signifying nature and spiritualizing ourselves. Perhaps few today are aware of their indebtedness to Transcendentalism, but that is hardly the measure of its success as an answer for those seeking meaning in a world increasingly alienated from humane values. And more to the point, that salvation rests firmly within our own grasp (or in secular terms, fate is still of our own making) remains American Transcendentalism's abiding religious message.

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Notes

1. "The Great God Self could not dwell at last with other gods, for his first commandment was: Thou shall have no other gods before me." (Moiser 1952, 202)
2. "Transcendentalism...was a faith rather than a philosophy; it was oracular rather than speculative, affirmative rather than questioning....In essence this new transcendental faith was a glorification of consciousness and will. It rested on the rediscovery of the soul that had been dethroned by the old rationalism; and it eventuated in the creation of a mystical egocentric universe wherein the children of God might luxuriate in their divinity. The Unitarians had pronounced human nature to be excellent; the transcendentalists pronounced it divine.... With ebbing faith men may deny their own divine nature, but the divinity is not destroyed....The one great miracle is the daily rebirth of God in the individual soul." (Parrington 1927, 1987, 381-2)

3. I have liberally borrowed from Jeffrey Duncan (1973) for this summary.

4. This view of the self is recurrent in Emerson's writings and not just the product of a tormented man attempting to deal with a personal tragedy. For instance in 1837, five years before his son's death, Emerson confided in his journal: "Man is insular and cannot be touched. Every man is an infinitely repellent orb, & holds his individual being on that condition" (1965, 329); also, "all parties acquiesce at last in a private box with the whole play performed before him *solus*." (1971b, 236).

5. Note, notwithstanding this solitary state, Emerson exhibited a strong sense of community and constantly re-examined his own place within society and history. Putting aside his political writings, simply look at how he uses history in the opening of "History" (Emerson 1979a) analogously to nature as the vehicle to join the collective of human experience.

6. In the summer preceding his resignation from the Unitarian ministry, Emerson visited the White Mountains and wrote a journal entry on this relationship of his inner soul and his conscious self: "How hard to command the soul or to solicit the soul.... We know little of its laws — but we have observed that a north wind clear cold with its scattered fleet of drifting clouds braced the body & seemed to reflect a similar abyss of spiritual heaven between clouds in our minds;... And having this experience we strive to avail ourselves of it & propitiate the divine inmate to speak to us again out of clouds & darkness. Truly whilst he speaketh not[,] man is a pitiful being. He whistles, eats, sleeps, gets his gun, makes his bargain, lounges, sins, and when all is done is yet wretched. Let the soul speak & and all this drivelling & these toys are thrown aside & man listens like a child." (Emerson 1964a, 28-9)

7. "Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters lower forms" (Emerson 1979d, 40); "a self-trust which is a trust in God himself" (Emerson 1883a, 67); "self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God" (Emerson 1883b, 222).

8. What in Nietzsche became the Will to Power, is in Emerson a more muted declaration of self-reliance and growth: "Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. ...the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing and therefore self-relying soul" (Emerson 1979d, 40-1); [man] "must

learn to walk alone" (Emerson 1883c, 118); "Man was made for conflict, not for rest. In action is his power; not in his goals but in his transitions man is great" (Emerson 1883d, 55).

9. Thoreau's popularity coincides with the growth of American environmentalism, which has occurred in two waves, the first shortly at the turn of the last century, and the second in the past 30 years (Glick 1969). But many detractors, beginning with James Russell Lowell and extending into our own period have found Thoreau's project wanting (Richardson 1986). For example, Jonathan Bishop: "[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, 22).

10. As explained, Thoreau followed a continuum between meticulous study of nature (as an object of scientific inquiry) to one which culminated in mystical union with nature (thus dissolving the subject/object dichotomy). These polar relationships frame the larger challenge of environmental interpretation, namely to rethink our assumptions about the very nature of the knowing self and its relationship to the world, whether regarded as a social construction (Evernden 1992), as an existential question, i.e., man's 'place' in nature (Garber 1991), or as an epistemological inquiry (Tauber 2001).

11. Much of Thoreau's angst centered on the problem of *writing* of this experience, of making conscious the experience that was fundamentally "unsayable" (Sells 1994), and he lamented the conflict imposed by a self-consciousness which required that primary experience must be reported — to others, and more fundamentally, to himself. I regard this epistemological challenge at the heart of Thoreau's creative venture (Tauber 2001, 173-85; 212-21).

12. Consider a typical Thoreauvian journal entry, 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; Thoreau, November 3, 1858, Journal Vol. XI ([1906] 1962, 282)

Thoreau explicitly accepts that he communes with nature *as he thinks*, as he thinks *of nature*, which must not be confused with the *product* of that observation -- the communion *with* nature. 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). When Thoreau observes, "our ideal is the only real," he acknowledges his debt to Emerson.

13. Thoreau's understanding of nature was complex and evolved through several stages (McGregor 1997). His dominant view was pastoral, but he clearly appreciated nature's titanic power and his own vulnerable place in the wild (e.g., atop Mt. Ktaadn in September, 1846 [Thoreau 1972, 60-71]).

14. Emerson's and Thoreau's deliberations came just at the moment in our culture when the challenge of positivism and its most jarring effects were first felt. Emerson and Thoreau chose to champion the individual's subjective knowledge, and the sanctity of personal experience at the expense of this newer form of objectivity (Tauber 2001). 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). Although this view slowly evolved from the birth of modern science, in Emerson's era new forms of objectivity quickly became an idealized form of knowledge and were broadly applied to the human sciences with monumental effects.

15. A more sinister reading makes Thoreau into a prophet, not of an autonomous self's triumph, but its destructive self-absorption. His placement ultimately depends on whether one regards his version of personal autonomy in service to a spiritual quest, or alternatively, as the rationale for narcissistic self-absorption, which may become a rationale for the denial of any Other. From this latter perspective, Thoreauvean self-assertion and self-realization are notions that in our own era have been, for better and for worse, the underlying ethos of a domineering self-centeredness. The assessment of these contending interpretations relies on charting a route between

anachronistic projections from later social and philosophical developments and a (hopefully) neutral dissection of the infrastructure of his philosophy. Addressing anachronism, we must acknowledge that Thoreau lived in a moral universe very different from our own, and he became a player in a vast historical drama, where the spiritual mission in which he was enlisted has drastically shifted. The history of philosophy is strewn with unintended consequences of ideas for which its authors had no foreknowledge or control, and Thoreau may be such a victim. But even in his own time, Thoreau's version of individual autonomy was considered extreme and often interpreted as beyond reclusive to anti-social and selfish (Richardson 1986). Putting aside the question of how successful his religious philosophy has been in our era, my views of his social and political philosophy is highly critical (Tauber 2001, 185-94).

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