

Musing on Emerson's Empire: An Homage

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What a strange thing, after the recent bicentennial of Emerson's birth, to attempt to take up residence with his work amidst a time of Hollywood megaspectacle and new media propagandistic natterings, in which quasi-Jacksonian nanoaudience weblogs chat conspiratorially about governmental scandals, stolen elections, Democratic failures and the Republican *Pax Americana*. How unsettling to try to speak seriously with the Poet of Nature and Spirit in an age of univocal militaristic terror and capitalism run amok. On Melrose Avenue, even the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf black-clad youth look not to the 1830's for an oracle but to the 1960's, if anywhere; and as they look out on the dirty gutters, oily cement, and sidewalks littered with decades of cigarette butts, soda cans, old gum, and advertising fliers, the most perceptive amongst them must note that paradise has long since been paved over. Worse, often in today's global megalopoli there is hardly even room for a parking lot. Instead, there are only endless highways – information or otherwise – hustling people from a ubiquitous here/there to a ubiquitous there/here and then back again.

Villon once asked “Where are the snows of yesteryear?” The contemporary student of Emerson might wonder where are the farms and woods and sacred spaces upon which we can settle our gaze, and so become recharged to the world's, and our own, inherent powers? Increasingly, we must search in vain. So just what, particularly, is the great New England humanist Ralph Waldo Emerson representative of in an age comprised now of ideas about posthuman cyborgs? For sure, great social critic of

dehumanized environments that he was, the present day question of Emerson's relevance seems unproblematic when it is confronted by the reign of culture industries and an ever-increasing technoculture that wants the wide world reduced to a web of technical networks. Still, though the writing is undoubtedly fine, perhaps there is something too ideal about the Emersonian idealism for these truly materialistic times?

For Emerson, the great personage embodied a universal truth that not only represented the *geist* of an age but which spilled over beyond itself as a moral lesson for the great leaders of tomorrow. But are there students for the Transcendentalist sermon in the new millennium, when the "universal" is believed to be more of a threat to the oppressed than an emancipation and when spirit itself has become conflated with the yuppified New Age puppet commodity that bears its name? If Emerson seems destined for a fair reception anywhere today, it would seem to be amongst the eclectic followers of transpersonal philosophy. But what measure would he make of the virility and force vibrationally emanating as harmonic frequencies from Marin County yoga yurts, poised neatly above pristine Pacific Ocean multi-million dollar vistas? Half a century ago, when Henry Miller took up his cabin in Big Sur, far beyond the air-conditioned nightmare, or better yet – Robinson Jeffers – it's not that far-fetched to believe that the hot mineral baths were daily set a-ripple with the Emersonian ethos. But today? It is hard to imagine Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ken Wilber sharing the same sunset easily. Pacific Palisades and Malibu are damned nice places to live, but are they verily Emersonian?

Whereas Emerson was supremely confident of his (of all of our) connection to a mind outside of time, alternatively, the larger problem today may be that the time is so very out of its mind. Thus, it might be asked: have we in our own power transformed the

soothsayer of eternal verities into an anachronism? Even if that which ailed 19th century Boston ails us too, in the way that the child's mole is the unlucky adult's sarcoma, can Emerson's razor be the knife that roots out the disease or would it instead amount to little more than a cruel Zorro mark on the cold blue corpse of the Guevaran revolutionary body? Yes, we must surely rely upon ourselves now but, then again, who else is there for us proffering and extending care in our direction?

Of course, the notion that the legacy of Emersonian prophecy is itself connected up to the tropic image of a patricidal Oedipus, abandoned to the wolves on a hillside as a babe, has been well articulated by Quentin Anderson in his famous extended essay The Imperial Self. Written in 1971, during the throws of American actions in Vietnam and the anti-imperial fallout of the student and hippie rebellions, Anderson rightly saw that despite Emerson's own temperamental leanings, which largely led him to personally negate the utopian negation of the "free love" societies that had formed around him in his own day, such conceptual poesies as the flower garlanded Allen Ginsberg's paeans to *Tat T'vam Asi* and *Hare Krishna* must have had their imaginary roots in The Dial as much as Haight-Asbury, India, or cosmic places unknown. The common rule coming down from Emerson, thought Anderson, is that one's potential for insight is perceived as being in direct relation to one's cultural outsider status. However, in 1971, despite the foreboding premonitions of Watergate on the horizon, Woodstock was revealing itself a bygone fantasy of the youth counterculture, Abbie Hoffman – the self-proclaimed "orphan of America" – had failed to imagine the Pentagon out of existence, and the adult's war trudged along in blasts of dioxin despite increasingly violent radicalism and social upheaval. Hence, Hoffman's teacher and Father of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse, was

himself rephrasing the generation's prophecy as he transformed the demand for the "great refusal" of all cultural forms into the less confrontational and fly-by-night message of Gramsci's "long march through the institutions."

It is with this in mind that we can see that Anderson's own stoic doubt as to the enduring liberatory potentials of the Emersonian project was informed by the counterculture's own larger return to the importance of historical consciousness, along with its having re-centered the necessity of engagement with the extant cultural institutions. In the language of Concord, the political point of the 1970's was not to found a better church beyond the church proper but to protect the flock by not subjecting it to a worse form of pastorship than one could oneself provide. It was time again for people to find out the degree to which they were the lengthened shadows of the social structure and not the reverse. Social and cultural revolution was to be subjected to reformation in its own right and the goal from the 1970's onward would be to reconfigure it as the measured strategy towards revolutionary reforms.

In this respect, then, the "imperial self" is a multifaceted concept and title. On the one hand, it represents the tendency towards psychic hypertrophy that Anderson found in Emerson, whom he felt conceived of greatness as filling "the space between God and the mob." The imperial self is akin to the Nietzschean filled up with the Hellenic will-to-power. It is the member of the natural aristocracy, who is no braggart but still tends to boast and speak in symphonies, super-structures, and laws. In "The Young American" Emerson wrote, "We must have kings, and we must have nobles. Nature provides such in every society, - only let us have the real instead of the titular. Let us have our leading and our inspiration from the best." The spirit of the thought may rub progressives of the

present age the wrong way, but even now it is hardly evidence of schizophrenic hallucination. Thus, many critics have overplayed the degree to which Anderson thought Emerson a psychotic of the first order. To the contrary, Anderson makes a careful point that tapping degrees of primary narcissism and connecting it to the flux of experience was of crucial importance to Emerson as an artist, as well as for the pre-1850 Emersonian audience who felt cut adrift between the two distant buoys of the democratic republic and the behemoth nation of proliferating states. “Transcendentalism is a carefully measured madness,” Anderson noted.

But, on the other hand, most importantly, this was also to admit that it was some form of madness still. Emerson routinely invokes the classical genre of the *somnium*. In one famous instance he writes, “I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, ‘This must thou eat.’ And I ate the world.” This is most unlike Scipio, conqueror of Carthage, whom Cicero had portrayed as engaged in a dream flight that helped him to recognize the insignificance of even his own great empire. Emerson instead is out-of-body and ready to get even higher. In The Imperial Self, Anderson notes how Emerson ate the world in order to produce the Word. In contradistinction, Scipio’s journey moved him to quietude. Both are examples of the hypertrophied self, yet each moves in a contrary direction. One is the warrior who would be priest, who drops the sword in favor of cosmic harmony. The other is the priest who would be warrior, and finds that the knowledge of cosmic harmony is “a new weapon in the magazine of power.” Yet, what kind of weapon is this exactly? Is it not Emerson’s madness that wills to believe that words do in fact hurt more than sticks and stones?

Imperial selfdom as hypertrophy is intimately connected up with the consciousness of undifferentiation and incorporation. In the Sixties' counterculture, one hoped to look upon the world with all the innocence and wonder that are beheld in the eyes of a child. Anderson surmised correctly that this wonder is psychologically akin to the unbounded "oceanic feeling" of eternity, that which Rolland had conveyed to Freud as the primordial source for religious instinct, and which Freud then mapped in Civilization and Its Discontents as the imperial self that seeks to manifest as "the feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole." Anderson, it seems, rejected Emerson's (and Rolland's) implicit claim that "the infinitude of the private man" is either life affirming, ego-adaptive or transformational, and instead he followed Freud in sensing that the feeling of being bathed by the blithe airs of an infinite space "too rare for the wings of words" is ultimately an infantile regression and an attempt to identify with the Id in a submerged consciousness.

As Harold Bloom has commented, the production of an imperial self is a spiritual state of incorporation that occurs after one such as Emerson has "ingested the world and other selves, until a single consciousness held for each of them all of the ideal." But this activity of consumption is thus imperial in the way that the sea is sovereign over the land and not Caesar over the plebs and barbarian tribes. Ginsberg is symptomatic of the Vietnam War, according to Anderson, just as the annexation of Texas found its symptom in Emerson's idealizations, but there is no reason to mistake the Beat poet for Kissinger or the writer of Nature for Davy Crockett, even if each must be thought together. The poetry of the Oversoul is no Alamo.

And yet, if Emerson was uneasy with the politics of “manifest destiny,” as Kris Fresonke asserts in her recent West of Emerson, we must too be mindful that he had worked in dedication to “the Spirit of America” and as a young man easily associated the imperial self with the imperial nation. In his Journal entry of June 20, 1822:

There is certainly something deeply interesting in the history of one who invades the coast of an unknown continent and first breaks the silence which hath reigned there since the creation. As he goes alone to the wilderness and sets his axe to the root of the forest and we reflect that this stroke which echoes through the wood begins a dominion which shall never end till this green and silent woodland shall groan beneath the feet of countless multitudes and shall exchange the solitary warble of a bird for the noise of nations, the outcry of human passion, and the groan of human misery. Under these views the settler ceases to be an ordinary adventurer, providing for himself and his son, or his friend – but becomes the representative of human nature, the father of the Country, and, in a great measure, the Arbiter of its future destinies.

The strict imperialism becomes even more explicit in an entry of December 21 later that year, which begins “There is everything in America’s favour, to one who puts faith in those proverbial prophecies of the Westward progress of the Car of Empire.” As of yet, Emerson has not himself committed to such faith however, but later in the entry after excitedly realizing that “Here then, new Romes are growing, & the Genius of man is brooding over the wide boundaries of infant empires” he affirms that it is in the heartland of America that “Other Cleopatras shall seduce, Alexanders fight, and Caesars die.”

Finally, Emerson concludes that when all other empires have faded from memory and into dust, “look well to the future prospects of America.”

Postcolonial criticism, deriving largely from the work of Edward Said in books like Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism, has analyzed how imperialist ideology operates through an oppositional binarism of “imperial self” and “colonized Other.” Such Others, it is theorized, are generally the uncivilized beings who lay beyond the possibility of the cult of *civitas*, or culture. The imperialist imaginary, then, moves against a figurative range of Manichean discourse that pictures a struggle between civilization, on the one hand, and barbarism, on the other. In between each are the colonies that, under the view of imperial eyes, are first exoticized and then primed for incorporation on terms always unfavorable to them. To the degree that they resist the movement and workings of empire, or exist altogether beyond the potential to be categorically examined and reformed, they come to enact the iconography of the monster – or, at best, the “evil empire.”

While the brute workings of empire seem highly unliterary, the logic of empire is primarily discursive; as Blake remarked, “Empire follows Art.” It was no accident that Napoleon took artists and scientists alongside of his army as he marched into Egypt, and it was from ventures such as this that the French built the museums of glass-encased artifacts, botanical gardens, and the zoos of *Le Spectacle*. Only a few years later the young Emerson would himself stand amidst the exhibits of the *Jardin des Plantes* and wonder at the compository quality that allowed him to recognize sameness across a diversity of species. “How much finer things are in composition than alone,” he wrote. If Emerson didn’t fully recognize the degree to which the composition he was viewing was

the exotic narrative of Napoleonic imperialism, he had read his Kant and at least understood the display transcendently - “Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer.” Here, then, are the beginnings of the imperial self: “I feel the centipede in me – cayman, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say continually, I will be a naturalist.” It is not much longer until, having detected the secret language of nature within himself, Emerson journals, “There is such an immense background to my nature that I must treat my fellow as Empire treats Empire and God God.”

In Nature, Emerson developed the insight of the *Jardin des Plantes* into the larger philosophy that would animate his career, finding that experience itself is our museum and the indwelling spirit its vigilant curator and tourist. Nature is the kind of stuff that delivers ecstasies and humanity, Emerson proposes, is the kind of thinking thing designed to receive and order them. The schema is a naturalized imperialism with human relations being “placed in the centre of beings,” radiating the moral law to the circumference, with all of nature’s objects at work on the periphery to “the profit of man.” If it is our beginning to sense the beauty inherent in nature’s commodity, to be human is *Homo Educandus*, and so though nature at first plays the tutor to humankind, we come to learn to see the involvement of our own learning in the process. At that moment those endowed with such recognitions are prepared may become the teachers and masters who can extort from nature its scepter and truly conform it to “the empire of thought.” We too have our commodity, and our’s apparently is in the shaping of worlds.

But if the self, as described by Emerson, went beyond hypertrophy and natural aristocracy to additionally encode the logic of cultural and political imperialism, to whom

is relegated to the status of Other? For one, it is nature itself once humanity has begun to grab hold of the golden key to the palace of the Creator. Nature, the exotic spectacle of farm, forest, and firmament, becomes a colony of human will. Says Emerson:

Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful.

Humanity, which had found its educement in the contemplation of natural wonder, suddenly is estranged from it and finds its order “inviolable.” As in Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” we can poetically induce the birds to sing our notes but we do not understand their own and, as Emerson envisioned, “The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us.” More monstrous still, however, is the body politic of people that knows not its own face and routinely digs out the most noble of landscapes.

The generalized and the massified life appear as the antithesis of the particularized Universal and, thus, the Other of the imperial self is in many respects the manifestation of its own degeneration. As previously noted, these are themselves highly degenerate times. To this, the Emersonian philosophy asks: “Does the fact look crass and material, threatening to degrade thy theory of spirit?” And it answers, unflinchingly, “Fear not the new generalization.” Emerson would marshal us to a heaven so that we “cannot be out-generalled” by the general nature of the cultural and political climate. Adam Cohen’s recent piece in the New York Times, “It’s Emerson’s Anniversary and He’s got 21st-Century America Nailed,” wrongly accuses Emerson of being responsible

for “pernicious American...self absorption,” for the evils of trickle-down economics and the “Enron effect” of corporate corruption, as well as for George Bush’s foreign policy crusade.

Emerson may have counseled “to believe what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men” but he balanced his spiritual solipsism with a liberal belief in the right of all people to express their private truths as part of a public life. Emerson’s imperial self, however all uniting and absorbing, is not an empirical given but rather the production of a courageous life and it begins in a state in which all mean egotism vanishes, so to blame Emerson for a State comprised of very mean egos indeed is sketchy. Yes, he is the transparent eyeball that is nothing but sees all, but it is dirty politics to misappropriate Emerson’s transcendental vision as the panoptic Sauron eye that serves as the emblem for Bush’s Total Information Awareness project. Equally unsound is the polemical conclusion that conflates the shaman-poet’s incorporated body of knowledge for a rapacious multinational. Emerson may have held that a man such as he could peer into things towards revealing, naming, and using their secrets, but so too might he be revealed. If nature was his periphery, than he also was in many respects peripheral to the Oversoul. Visionary powers could be granted to him only because the servant of spirit was, in his mind, as much a solitary and penitent subservient to reformation as he was the judge and magistrate who could cast out surprise sentences.

For Emerson, the poet is undoubtedly emperor; but the universal sense of the poet meant also that the power of poetry was universally available. Emersonianism, despite its many contradictions and its re-making of imperial language and logic, has never lent its hat to the reconstruction projects of militarism or unbridled capital development. It was a

literature of virtues, something the projects of our modern State apparently know little of. When we are told by Emerson, “All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do...Build, therefore, your own world,” it is an existential challenge that is uttered, not the poet’s genomic code for social apathy and individualistic greed.

Simply: there is a grave difference between the sensual and the spiritual person in Emerson. The “sensual man” finds his great representative in Napoleon:

...an experiment, under the most favorable conditions, of the powers of intellect without conscience. Never was such a leader so endowed, and so weaponed; never leader found such aids and followers. And what was the result of this vast talent and power, of these immense armies, burned cities, squandered treasures, immolated millions of men, of this demoralized Europe? It came to no result.

No result, thought Emerson, because such a person as Napoleon will always represent the “sensual and selfish aim” that seeks “to live and thrive without moral principle.” But whereas “The sensual man conforms thoughts to things,” the person of spirit – the poet of the moral sense – “conforms things to his thoughts.” The poet seeks, not to purify the material world, to cleanse it of evil-doers, but to create a world through the purification of soul. This then is the answer to the politics of “manifest destiny.” There *is a manifest destiny* available to each of us, thought Emerson, but to reduce this spiritual truth about the nature of our own human potentials such that it becomes merely a literal policy of extermination and material accumulation is typical of the sensualist’s epic, not the spiritualist’s. For Emerson, one’s destiny was as evident and approachable in the Concord woods as it was in California. There was no reason to head for the gold rush in those

hills, when the philosopher's stone could be achieved through the careful manufacture of one's own ecstatic virtue, craft, and love.

Timeless though Emerson claimed this truth to be, we may express surprise that such wisdom seems as timely as ever now. But, then again, we too are children of empire. Thus, I conclude that Emerson may still out-flank us yet, not because he has successfully incorporated us into his quicksand past, but rather because he continues to illuminate elements of a protean future called The Dream for a Better World. Emerson is still valuable. A writer such as he can help us to soar above the leaden weights of jump-cut consumerism and hyperlinked desires, even as he goads us to question deeper into the complex mythology of the ongoing American imaginary...it is more and more so the planetary imaginary – imperialism to the end. A careful reading of Emerson, I believe, might yet encourage us to make more of an autonomous and germinal life than the stale midnight place of dead words we inhabit, an email society inscribed by advertising billboards and enclosed in tabloid journalism. Quentin Anderson is probably correct that the Emersonian methodology is hardly a *pharmakon*; and it might be added that many free-spirits who have sought libertry through the ingestion of *pharmakon* have made only the early grave their emblem. But, then again, the cave is so very dark and we know the images before us are false. “Surely it cannot be wrong to dream of the sun?” cries *humanitas*.