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On 8 August 1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson sent a letter to his brother William. Throughout the summer he had been writing and rewriting the manuscript that would become his book *Nature*, and by the time he wrote to his brother the work was nearly complete. It would be published, anonymously, on 9 September. In his letter, Emerson makes a suggestion that has attracted the attention of many commentators, but which few, I think, have examined fully: ‘The book of *Nature* still lies on the table’, Emerson wrote. ‘There is, as always, one crack in it not easy to be soldered or welded’¹. What is this crack? And what precisely is Emerson’s complaint? The crack is there, he says, ‘as always’. Does this refer to a problem in Emerson’s own writing, some idiosyncratic, compositional difficulty? Or, more likely I would suggest, was Emerson struggling with a perennial difficulty facing anyone who presumes to treat systematically the subject to which his book is directed, namely the relation between Nature and Spirit?

In what follows I locate this crack in Emerson’s *Nature* and consider its meaning. I shall argue that to solder or weld it was indeed more than difficult, it was impossible. The rift between Nature and Spirit cannot be permanently joined, the two cannot be made to hang together of their own accord as the images of soldering and welding would suggest: to think they can be is dangerous, totalitarian. Only in a greater context – in the fullness of the place where each of us ‘work and live, work and live’² – can each himself or herself *hold* them together, joining them in

¹ On this crack see Jacobson (1993), p. 6.

² Emerson (1996), ‘The Over-Soul’, p. 394.

each moment by a daily practice of virtue and justice and love. Such is the ‘prospect’, I argue, towards which *Nature* directs its reader: the prospect of actively ‘building [one’s] own world’, of resolving each morning to consummate anew the marriage of Nature and Spirit, of the human and divine; a practice to which Emerson’s book, or any book, can only recommend us, but which only we ourselves can carry out.

I present and defend these claims in three parts. First, I examine the development of *Nature* in the several years preceding its publication, and consider Emerson’s reasons for bringing together into one work the chapters on Nature and Spirit he had long intended to publish separately. At this level, philologically, the location of the book’s crack is plain enough: it falls at the border between these two works as initially conceived, between the chapters on ‘Idealism’ and ‘Spirit’. Next, I offer a reading of the book itself meant to exhibit and develop a new account of what one commentator has described as its ‘spiraling’ movement of ascent³. I aim throughout to show that the culmination of this ascent in an apocalyptic promise of ‘perfect sight’, the book’s final image, remains unconsummated in the pages of *Nature*, incomplete and unstable. The book, like each of its chapters, points beyond itself to a larger whole – an actual, dynamic union of Nature and Spirit – the vision and inhabitation of which we can hope to attain only by the co-creative and ‘revelatory’ *activity* of ‘building our own world’. Though Emerson in *Nature* offers many glimpses of what this activity might look like, these are always ambiguous and ‘prospective’, never programmatic. Yet one can understand Emerson’s reasons for adopting this ‘beatific’ style, I suggest, by considering together two very different expressions he offers of the relation between vision and action: that *the watcher is a doer*, implied at the end of the Idealism chapter in *Nature* – the false conclusion of the book – and that *the seer is a sayer*, suggested two years later in his Divinity School Address. The third, concluding part I devote to this task.

³ Hodder discusses the notion in Hodder (1989), p. 75.

Writing *Nature*

The theme of nature, and specifically of its ‘uses’, seems to have seized Emerson’s imagination around the time he resigned his Unitarian pastorate in 1832. On Christmas Day of that year he embarked on a five-week sea voyage to Europe, a trip which left him deeply impressed by what he called in his journal the ‘capital art of navigation’⁴. ‘The history of navigation,’ he wrote, ‘affords the most striking instances ... of the accurate adjustment of the powers of nature to the wants of man’. A railroad journey from Manchester to Liverpool impressed him as well, and he would comment upon it in *Nature* three years later: ‘What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the rail-road car!’⁵ Emerson’s turn to nature seems to have been prompted most decisively, however, by a visit in July 1833 to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, about which he wrote in his journal soon after:

‘The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever, as you look along this bewildering series of animated forms ... & the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized forms. ... I am moved by strange sympathies, I say continually, “I will be a naturalist”.’⁶

Atheism was never a real option for Emerson. He was an intuitive ‘believer’, but in what? Orthodoxy seemed incredible – he resigned his pastorate primarily over doctrinal doubts related to the service of communion – and liberal Christianity seemed unnecessary, indistinguishable from the better aspects of the non-Christian culture around it. Barbara Packer has suggested that the ‘Archimedean point’ for Emerson, from early on, was his belief in the presence in every

⁴ This quotation and the following on navigation from Pelikan (1985), pp. 12f.

⁵ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 12.

⁶ Quoted in Packer (1982), p. 41.

human being of a ‘moral sentiment’ or, as he puts says at one point, a ‘religious sentiment’⁷: an intuitive directedness of our mind and character toward the whole which reveals to us the possibility of ‘seeing’ truly, as Emerson writes in *Nature*, ‘the necessary Ideas in the mind of God’⁸. One could go further than Packer and suggest, following a comment by Stanley Cavell, that – unlike Kant, but like Malebranche – Emerson believed in the possibility of ‘intellectual intuition’ or, following Augustine and the medievals, of ‘divine illumination’⁹. We are drawn by the moral or religious sentiment within us to a clear (if not always distinct) perception or *reception* of God and of the ‘necessary Ideas’ through nature, then proceed *actively* to create and ever recreate our (sensible) world on their basis. As one might say, we ‘adjust the powers of nature’ in ever new ways to the changing ‘wants of man’. In this way, Packer’s reference to Archimedes is made to seem especially apt: the latter’s famous declaration, ‘give me a place to stand on and I will *move* the world’, becomes for Emerson a promise to *make* and *remake* the world.

It seems that Emerson found a way to bring together his burgeoning interest in nature with his belief in the moral sentiment by drawing on the work of the popular eighteenth century Swedish mystic and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. An important element of Swedenborg’s teaching was his assertion of a correspondence between the laws of nature and spiritual truths – such truths are revealed to us, he held, by meditation on nature’s laws. Emerson adopted this notion of correspondences and, characteristically, adapted it to suit his own purposes. Two aspects of his adaptation are important: first, he held not only that natural *laws* manifest spiritual truths, but that every natural *object* corresponds to and can reveal some such truth; and second, he regarded this ‘spiritual element’ in every object not as something ‘given’ to us *simpliciter*, but

⁷ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 28

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24

⁹ See Cavell (2003), p. 13.

rather as something that we ourselves infuse into the object by constituting it *as* an object in the world we make for ourselves. The spiritual element in objects is no longer a theological dogma, as for Swedenborg, but either an admixture of human *will*, as when we create works of art or other objects of beauty, or else the result of our establishing, in language, an *analogical relation* between an object and a ‘spiritual fact’, as when Paul likens the new creation of our spiritual bodies to the growth of a seed¹⁰.

Emerson was convinced that the development of a ‘true theory’ of these correspondences is possible. As he writes, on the first page of *Nature*:

‘Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of creation so far, as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds the order of things can satisfy’.

Such a theory would be more than a ‘theory of nature’. It would yield an ‘idea of creation’, and ‘explain ... all phenomena’, including many regarded by the science of Emerson’s time, and our own, as ultimately inexplicable: ‘language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex’¹¹. It would emerge as a fruit of the exercise of Reason, not an acquisition or product of the Understanding; its ‘explanations’ would be, in terms Dilthey would introduce later, more a product of *Verstehen* than of *Erklärung*; it would be emphatically first-person. Granting these characterizations, it seems reasonable to suggest that Emerson’s ‘true theory’ of the relation between Nature and Spirit – the movement toward which is the aim of his book – is closer in its spirit and associations to the Greek *theoria*, meaning ‘contemplation’ or ‘speculation’ in the sense of ‘looking’ or ‘gazing’, than to our more abstract, third-person English word ‘theory’. Its

¹⁰ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

achievement, Emerson suggests in the Language chapter of *Nature*, would make the world for each of us ‘an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause’¹².

By early 1836 Emerson had drafted nearly the whole of *Nature*, yet as evidenced in his journals seems still to have conceived of its chapters as constituting two separate works: an extended essay on ‘Nature’, comprising chapters one through six of the final version, and a second essay on ‘Spirit’, including at least what became chapters seven and eight and, one imagines, something more. Both Packer¹³ and Hodder¹⁴ and, it seems, most commentators agree, however, in affirming the crucial significance of a shocking event Emerson suffered in May of that year which seems to have sent his thinking in a new direction and which finally, I shall suggest, may be regarded as having led him to join the Nature and Spirit chapters into one text: the event was the death of his brother Charles.

Since returning from Europe Emerson had remarried (his first wife, Ellen, having died tragically of tuberculosis in 1831), and by early 1836 his wife Lidian was expecting a child, Waldo. In a letter to a friend in March, Emerson expressed joy at the circumstances of his life: ‘I think at times’, he wrote, ‘I shall never be unhappy again’¹⁵. His brother Charles seemed vigorous and in good health, and the two were frequent correspondents. As Hodder puts it, ‘Charles was Waldo’s closest confidant, friend, interlocutor’. When Charles first visited a doctor after falling ill in April 1836, he was told he had a bad cold. In fact he had tuberculosis, though this was not diagnosed until the final week of his life; he died suddenly on 9 May. Emerson arrived in New York to visit him the next day, but found he was too late.

¹² Ibid., p. 25

¹³ See Packer (1982), pp. 48-57.

¹⁴ See Hodder (1989), pp. 53f. Cf. p. 64, where Hodder writes: ‘In fact, there is evidence that in some psycho-spiritual sense the “sacrifice” of Charles made *Nature* possible.’

¹⁵ Packer (1982), p. 49.

Charles's 'senses', Emerson wrote in his journal after his brother's death, 'were those of a Greek'. Packer draws attention to the qualities that Charles had 'seemed to represent' for Emerson: 'an effortless self-mastery, a responsiveness to the natural world, ... in short, a kind of health that Emerson himself admired without hope of attaining'¹⁶. This seeming, however, was set in a very new context for Emerson upon reading his brother's journals, which, again according to Packer, revealed that Charles 'had not, in fact, been as free from internal division as Emerson had confidently assumed, that his gaiety and courage had concealed much that was melancholy, even self-tormenting'¹⁷. How to understand Charles's death? And how to understand this disorienting revelation of his brother's life in its fullness? Emerson seems to have despaired of understanding, and looked instead to reason. The following passage from the Discipline chapter of *Nature*, which concludes the section concerned with the discipline of Reason and in fact the chapter itself, seems plainly to refer to these events, incorporating them into a larger, ultimately rational whole:

'When much intercourse with a friend has supplied us with a standard of excellence, and has increased our respect for the resources of God who thus sends a real person to outgo our ideal; when he has, moreover, become an object of thought, and, whilst his character retains all its unconscious effect, is converted in the mind into solid and sweet wisdom, – it is a sign to us that his office is closing, and he is commonly withdrawn from our sight in a short time'¹⁸.

The effect of Charles's death on the crucial revisions Emerson made to the text of *Nature* between May and August of 1836 of course cannot be determined with certainty. Yet it does seem defensible to see this event as having been more decisive than either Packer or Hodder suggest in leading Emerson to join the Nature and Spirit chapters into one text. For how could

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 31

Emerson, after the revelations uncovered in his brother's journal, separate the appearance, say the 'phenomenon', of his relationship with Charles from the hidden turmoil of his brother's heart? Secretly, 'without observation'¹⁹, spirit ever underlies the phenomena of nature. Any 'true theory' of the sort Emerson sought must go further than to establish us as 'speculative' readers of the world-as-book; it must make possible a marriage of spiritual man and phenomenal nature such that the two become, as one might say, one flesh. So too – and of this we are certain – Emerson's drafted chapters did become one text, one body, during the summer of 1836, with 'Spirit' concealed behind the published work's title no less, as Emerson had found, than often it lies concealed behind the phenomena of Nature itself.

Reading *Nature*

Nature is of course a work peculiarly ill-suited to summary treatment, yet one can usefully and I think without too much distortion trace the contours of its movement from chapter to chapter in such a way as to reveal the carefully designed structure underlying Emerson's aphoristic paragraphs. I aim to show, following a suggestion by Hodder²⁰, that this structure is best expressed by Emerson himself in the first lines of the epigraph appended to the work: 'A subtle chain of countless rings / the next unto the farthest brings'. The book's chapters are not merely juxtaposed; they *move*, like Newton climbing each atop the shoulders of its predecessors in an ever-burgeoning ascent toward perfect perspicuity and wholeness. By this ascent, the reader is conveyed to the very limits of speculative possibility; as far as any author may lead his passive reader. The 'final end' of nature and of Emerson's book – the achievement of the 'true theory' and 'perfect sight' towards which he urges us – is left, necessarily I've suggested, to the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰ I adopt the notion of the book's spiralling structure from Hodder, but the reading in all its detail is my own.

readers themselves as a ‘prospect’ and task. Emerson the author can reveal to us the rift between Nature and Spirit, and charge us with hope and desire for its fusion, but neither he nor anyone can mend it for us.

The book’s first sentence places us in our ‘age’; an age which, we are told, is backward-looking, ‘retrospective’. We lack the contact with Nature that was the delight and strength of our forebears, busying ourselves instead with ‘the dry bones of the past’. We write ‘biographies, histories, and criticism’. And yet, *pace* Eliot, there is ‘water amongst the rock’; we can look forward rather than back, and inquire as to the ‘end of nature’, meaning here, I would suggest, both its *terminus ad quem* or ‘whereto’, and, in another sense, its *terminus a quo* or final cause²¹ – the true *point d’origine* or ‘whence’ of Nature, which lies beyond the horizon of even our most probing retrospection and to which we have access, paradoxically, only by looking forward. The true *theoria* by which this spherical unity of Nature is unveiled, when understood as I’ve suggested as a kind of ‘looking’ or ‘gazing’, begins from an intellectual recognition of both myself as ‘seer’, as *Soul*, and of *Nature* – including both the phenomenal world as we find it and the products we make from it – as the ‘seen’, the ‘NOT ME’. First to distinguish these terms, then to draw them together again in a prospect of elevated unity, is the task of Emerson’s book.

Emerson’s first chapter, Nature, offers as it were a foretaste of this elevated unity in what is perhaps the book’s most often-cited passage: man, in the woods, is portrayed as a ‘transparent eye-ball’. Emerson writes, ‘I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am a part or particle of God’. The passage is simultaneously beautiful and gawkish, offensive. Were we to be an ‘eye’ – something less vulgar and more abstract, say, like the ‘eye of the mind’ – the image would cause no offense, it would not provoke. But we are an

²¹ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 32. Here Emerson suggests that discipline, the highest ‘use of nature’, in fact points beyond itself to a further ‘final cause of the universe’.

‘eye-ball’, a mass of ‘blue jelly’, as Emerson would describe it later in his lecture American Slavery. Emerson’s choice of this image, I would suggest, is no slip or stylistic absence of mind; it seems designed, rather, to remind the reader that the beatific vision or apocalypse portrayed in the passage and to which *Nature* is directed can never be the stuff of disembodied contemplation, but always and ever shall come to us as we are, in all our historical and corporeal messiness. The image appeals not to our opinions, but to our character; it ‘tests’ us, challenging us to recognize plainly just what ‘holding together’ Nature and Spirit must entail: not a neat and satisfying reduction of one into the other, but a scandalous, unending and even impure work of marrying the seemingly unmarriageable – folly, in short, to those who lack eyes to see.

Having thus charted his course and provoked our desire, Emerson begins his ascent. The following four chapters move through four ‘uses of nature’: commodity, beauty, language, and discipline – corresponding roughly, one is tempted to say, to Aristotle’s four causes, and culminating in the ‘discipline of reason’ by the practice of which we are propelled into idealism and ultimately, if we do not stop there, onward to the prospect of ‘perfect sight’. The first use of nature, commodity, is the most ‘temporary and mediate’. We ‘combine’ and ‘reproduce’ things we find in nature, and use them, like the woodcutter, as matter to achieve our practical ends. Yet these ends point beyond themselves; we eat *for* working, and by our work satisfy a ‘nobler want’, the soul’s desire for beauty.

Like all the following, this next use of nature, beauty, includes the former in itself. By our endeavors of commodity, by purposive action in its most basic form, the universe is made to appear as a *cosmos*, a beautiful whole. Emerson’s chapter on Beauty is the first clearly to exhibit the book’s spiraling structure in microcosm: the reader is led through three ‘degrees’ of this use of nature. First we perceive natural forms purely in their particularity; these serve, crucially, to

constitute our horizon, yet themselves are fleeting and, like a swarm of butterflies, pass quickly away. Next we come to discern in each of these particulars a ‘spiritual element’, which at this stage means the admixture of human *will*, or virtue. The particulars through which these elements of spirit are revealed become ‘ancillary’, Emerson writes, to the source from whence they spring – ancillary to *man*. This priority of man, or of spirit-*through*-man, is brought to consummation when we come, finally, to apprehend the beauty of the world, taken whole, as an object of the intellect. Artists do this best, concentrating this wholeness of cosmic beauty on a single point, in a single work, by passing it, alchemically, through the ‘alembic’ of man. Yet this wholeness of art is not final, for it is still grounded in appearance. Like commodity it points beyond itself.

Emerson’s next chapter is called Language, and follows the same three-fold gradual movement as Beauty. First, Emerson writes, we recognize the original connection between words and things – that words are ‘signs of natural facts’. More deeply, second, we recognize – and Emerson here is indebted to Swedenborg – that these natural facts themselves are ‘symbols’ of spiritual facts. By considering these latter we come to discern, though as yet in a glass darkly so to say, the ‘universal soul’ or whole of which these deeper facts are parts or particles: intellectually, we call this soul ‘Reason’; in relation to Nature, ‘Spirit’; in language, we call it ‘Father’. The relations between natural and spiritual facts are analogical, and we human beings are their authors. To craft and dwell amongst these relations, Emerson seems to suggest, is the highest use of everyday language, yet language affords a still higher, third and final use, namely the discernment and articulation of ‘natural laws’ by means of which, as he says later, we ‘carry centuries of observation in a single formula’, and, by contemplating the relation between these laws and the matter which they govern, render the universe transparent to our sight. The

conclusion of Language, then, in some ways parallels that of idealism: we recognize fully the phenomenality of the world, and glimpse the universal soul – Reason, Spirit, Father – hidden beneath. Yet also like the Idealism chapter this seeming summit of impersonal speculation is not the end; it is rather Discipline – the final, personal, and *moral* use of nature – which crowns and completes Emerson’s sequence of natural uses.

Unlike Beauty and Language, the structure of the next chapter, Discipline, is two-fold, apportioned between the disciplines of Understanding and Reason. Understanding, Emerson tells us, adds and combines and measures things; Reason elevates the lessons of understanding to the realm of thought, and so marries matter and mind (not, importantly, Nature and Spirit). Emerson takes the Understanding/Reason distinction from Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, who borrowed it in turn from Kant’s *Verstand* and *Vernunft*. The chapter, however, is concerned with the (individual) *discipline* of these faculties, not the faculties themselves. By the *discipline* of understanding, we come to perceive the differences between things, and form our common sense; natural facts are made to conform to our character, much as sensible intuitions, for Kant, are subsumed under the categories of our mind. By the *discipline* of reason we learn to see every ‘natural process’ as a version of a ‘moral sentence’; conscience enters here. Even a farm, Emerson suggests, when viewed by one disciplined in reason, ‘preaches’ to us and is seen to point to the moral law at the centre of our being. His description of this revelation, towards which all the preceding uses of nature are directed and in which they are included, is sensual, even sexual: beneath even the ‘undermost garment’ of nature we come to *know* its ultimate source in the ‘Universal Spirit’. Actions, he says, express this revelation more clearly than words. ‘One act of a wise man is to do all’.

Emerson had originally conceived the chapter that became Idealism as the conclusion to a single work; as the ‘holding in thought’, perhaps, of the lessons of the preceding reflections. As we receive it, however, Idealism is clearly a dead end – and a dangerous one. For without a supererogation beyond the confines of Nature, without an active movement past every ‘theory of nature’ to an ‘idea’ and indeed a practice of creation, we may easily find ourselves mired in the quicksand of world-denying dualism – the same dualism that recoils at Emerson’s portrayal of man as a kind of ‘blue jelly’. The chapter’s movement toward this anti-climax begins appropriately enough in skepticism: Emerson has proceeded through the uses of nature and brought us to a great height, yet now he asks: does Nature itself even exist? Frivolous people have made ‘burlesque’ of this question, he says. Clearly the sober tone of his treatment evinces a resolve to avoid such trifles, and offer instead a serious assessment of the proper function and limits of idealism.

Although the senses conspire to make us believe in the reality of Nature, he writes, the ‘universal effect of culture’ is to make us disbelievers. This ‘universal’ effect is parsed into five particulars or degrees, worth recounting briefly as, again, they mount one upon the other in a movement of ascent: (1) by the simple phenomenal experience of motion, mere changes in perspective, Nature apprises us of a difference between ourselves as spectators and that which we see as spectacle, and this pleases us; (2) the poet gives the same pleasure by investing the world with humanity, and by his art, where the sensual man makes thoughts conform to things, the poet makes things conform to thought; (3) the natural philosopher or scientist carries this pleasure higher, imparting a spiritual life to nature and, by the articulation of natural laws, ‘leaves matter like a corpse’; (4) the practitioner of intellectual science, the speculative philosopher, points to Ideas where the scientist points to laws, and his exertions work the same

effect, though higher (meaning: more whole); (5) finally, we reach the pinnacle of culture: the *practice* of ideas. This practice is ethics and religion, both of which, Emerson says, ‘put nature under foot’. Here we learn ‘the first and last lesson of religion’: ‘The things that are seen, are temporal; the things that are unseen, are eternal’. This lesson, he continues, often leads devotees to ‘flout Nature’, and sometimes, like Mani and Plotinus, to ‘arrive at a certain hostility and indignation towards matter’.

This can be no real *terminus* for Emerson; idealism is not enough. Although it can reverse our more vulgar conceptions of the relation of Nature to Spirit – although, that is, it can function ‘propaedeutically’ to undermine the intuitions of ‘sensual man’ – it is not fecund, it has no progressive element; it stands still and ‘watches’. The chapter concludes with what is in fact a decisive denunciation of such mere speculation, the force of which becomes apparent, I believe, only later in his Divinity School Address, about which I comment in the third part of this paper. The chapter’s final sentence delivers this judgment: the soul of the idealist, Emerson writes, is ‘a watcher more than a doer, and it is a doer, only that it may the better watch’.

Thus we cross, philologically, the crack in Emerson’s text, and proceed to its penultimate chapter, Spirit – less than half the length of Idealism, but decisive, even redemptive in its import. Two suggestions Emerson makes here are crucial: first, that the progressive element lacking in idealism is Spirit itself, or, more specifically, our active *co-operation* with Spirit and, as he would put it in later essays, our ‘obedience’ to it – from the Latin *ob-audire*, meaning ‘to listen or attend to’. This is more than mere watching. Second, Emerson introduces ‘three problems ... put to nature by the mind; What is matter? Whence is it? and Whereto?’ Theories of nature and idealism itself, he writes, respond only to the first of these problems. The latter two – which call for knowledge of, say, the Alpha and Omega of matter – require a different response, for such

knowledge is nothing more than the fruit of a certain practical obedience to Spirit, an obedience that is total and ultimately kenotic; it is existential knowledge, one might say, not speculative. A suggestion Emerson makes in his essay *The Over-Soul* five years later expresses this requirement vividly and remains in the reader's mind: The 'energy' of Spirit, he writes, 'does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession'²².

One might say that Emerson's final chapter, *Prospects*, is the Easter Monday of the book. Our spiraling ascent has burst the bounds of understanding; we find ourselves disoriented, in a world remade, unveiled, yet in appearance the same. Only Reason, we discover, and indeed only 'the highest Reason' can guide us in navigating this new vista, and even our exercise of this, our sole instrument, is ever for us in history initial, medial, and without guarantees. Reason reclaims its 'sceptre' only in moments, fleetingly, beatifically; we cannot be its masters and possessors, for rather it possesses us. In each moment anew it reveals to us a knowledge of our relation to Nature, a relation that is ever changing and about which we can learn only by 'untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility'. If we fail to receive this knowledge, if our reason seems at times all-too-human, the fault lies not in Nature or even in Reason itself, but in ourselves: Emerson writes, 'The ruin or blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque'²³.

Poetry, Emerson suggests, may offer the best hope for overcoming this ruin or blank for, as he claims following Plato, it 'comes nearer to vital truth than history'. It is appropriate in this respect that perhaps the most inspired passages in *Nature* are attributed not to Emerson himself but to his 'Orphic poet', who speaks twice in *Prospects*, and whose second 'song' concludes the

²² Emerson (1996), 'The Over-Soul', p. 396.

²³ Emerson (1996), *Nature*, p. 47.

book. The poet sings first of man, beginning, ‘The foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit’; liminal images of infancy, sleep, and death mark this first song, reminding the reader of human limits. Later, in the final lines of this final chapter, the poet sings of nature and our prospects within it: ‘Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it’. This second song calls the reader’s mind to human potential: the poet continues,

‘[L]ine for line and point for point, your dominion is as great as [that of the greatest men], 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’.

Heed this call, the song concludes, and you shall find that you have entered, ‘without observation’, the ‘kingdom of man over nature’, a transit no less wondrous than that of ‘the blind man ... gradually restored to perfect sight’.

Watching and doing, seeing and saying

Nature concludes with Emerson pointing to the horizon, beckoning us to look and see. We are given no concrete instructions, no new program or set of norms, though we might wish for these – like the blind man in John’s gospel, at least then we would know what to *do*: ‘Go wash in the pool of Siloam’ (Jn. 9:7). We would know ‘how to go on’ in Wittgenstein’s sense; we could simply follow Emerson’s new ‘rule’. I want to suggest however that the seeming ambiguity of *Nature*’s conclusion is no fault, but in fact the book’s defining virtue. For Emerson calls us emphatically not to *watch* the unfolding of his conclusion, then *do* certain things in light of this new information. His call is for us to *see* Nature itself, by seeing Spirit through it, in a new way – to reterritorialize it, say – and then, at all times, from this quite new, ever-new platform, to act, to respond dialogically to the promptings of Spirit – to *say*. This saying, in the

full sense I believe Emerson intends for it, seems not to be some ‘means’ we might employ to bridge the gap between Nature and Spirit; rather it *is* their union, their marriage, itself.

By the theory of Nature we are conveyed to the highest peak, the discipline of reason. We *watch*, like Mani and Plotinus; we *do*, ‘that [we] may the better watch’. This watching is both our end and final cause. All phenomena, we find, have their place as parts or particles of the one great spectacle; all things and events, even the death of a friend, we regard with a stoical pathos of distance. They have their sufficient reason. For what is it to watch? The voyeur through his binoculars first ‘sees’ the object of his curiosity – for a moment, at first, he recognizes or identifies him – but from that moment on we say he ‘watches’. His object does not in turn recognize him, he does not know he is there; under the circumstances he is an object *merely*, a thing without freedom. So great is the voyeur’s desire that we imagine him aiming to increase the perspicuity of his gaze, and ‘doing’ things efficiently to achieve this; buying more powerful binoculars, resituating himself. He forms fantasies about his object, crafts stories about its life, their life together – so much transcendental illusion! Like Kant’s ‘light dove’, the voyeur imagines himself to be flying in empty space, for in fact there is no ‘life together’ for these two, only the probing violence of the watcher’s monologous gaze. Such watching is surely, for Emerson, a dead end, yet also more: for there is moral failure here as well, a busy ignorance of Spirit and refusal of relationship, communion. As the boy might address the voyeur, so we might imagine Nature addressing mere watchers in the words of the house owner in Luke’s gospel: ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me ... you evildoers!’ (Lk 13:27).

What is it, then, to see? Even the voyeur necessarily sees at first; this seeing is the root of his desire, though for him not its flower. To see is to recognize, as when we see duck or rabbit in the famous gestalt, or finally ‘get’ a joke. Seeing is intentional, active; that which we see is

formed or colored by at least the purposes we bring to it, to say nothing of the idealist's categories, yet also we may be led *by* what we see to amend or limit these purposes. We do not think to 'see' a mountain in the duck-rabbit. Seeing, it seems, is always a seeing-as. It is a commonplace that I and my neighbor often see different things in a film; we almost see different *films*, though we've 'watched' the same reel. If truly we've seen, if our vision has moved our desire, then this difference shall move us to 'say': For *why* has our neighbor seen so differently? From *whence* has she derived her impressions? Perhaps we are indignant: How dare she! We shall want an account, and want to challenge, to re-challenge it, for to see, in some sense, is to believe – vision is cognitive; it has, or suggests, content. Seeing, we form judgments, we enter a space of reasons and, among our fellows, a space of disputation. We struggle both with what we see, and with our neighbors' accounts of the same. We try to form a coherent picture; to 'build our own world'. The purpose of our saying may be in part, like the watcher's, 'the better to see', yet our living relation, our communion with the seen – our active effort to recognize it, to know it truly – ensures that such mere improving aims shall not be our last. Our improvements, that is, shall not be merely our own – that *I* may better see – but is rather communal, like the space of reasons from which our sight derives its sense; they shall have as their object that *all* should see better, that *all* should say with conviction, for only by such harmony can the integrity of one's own melody be secured.

And so Emerson offers no program in *Nature*. He does not presume to mend the crack in his text. He offers no new object for our greedy, watchful gaze. He would have Spirit say: *noli me tangere* – 'do not touch me', if your aim be to master and possess. For enough objects already we find to tantalize this totalizing fantasy. Emerson would wake in us something else: the true *theoria*, 'perfect sight', a vision that desires not only to dwell with Nature and with Spirit

through it, but to *move* with it, forever pitching and re-pitching its tent, progressing by a self-reliant 'saying', by constant *re*-form, to live and work out our conjugal vocation; a vocation that is circular, its end and final cause being the same, and yet mysteriously fecund.

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