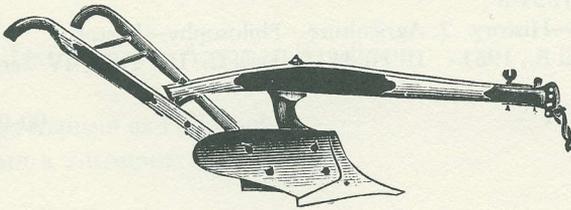


# The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism

Edited by Paul B. Thompson

*and*

Thomas C. Hilde



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## Emerson and the Agricultural Midworld

ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

EMERSON'S UNRELENTING inquiry into the structures and potencies of nature place him at the forefront of those philosophers who have advanced our understanding of nature's complex forms of interaction. His sensitivity for the metaphors buried within ordinary affairs enabled him to exhibit the intimate correlation between the human process and the unlimited scope of nature. Each local scene carried within itself a lesson or fable that had archetypal power reaching down into the heart of the world. In translating these native metaphors into poetic utterance, Emerson allowed nature to exhibit its own inner rhythms and dynamisms. More importantly, this compelled the finite human process to open itself to that which forms its own measure and origin.

Parallel to his search for the elusive potencies of nature is his exploration of human paradigms and their correlation to the deeper currents of the world. These "representative men" serve to guide us toward the genial forms of empowerment that make the human process unique within the innumerable orders of the world. At turns Emerson celebrates the poet, the artist, the statesman, and the farmer as living symbols of nature. Each type represents a clearing onto the spiritual forces that unify and quicken the natural orders that we encounter. In emulating these paradigmatic individuals we learn those secrets of the spiritual life that would otherwise remain beyond our ken.

In Emerson's early writings he celebrates the poet as the "new-born bard of the holy Ghost" (1836, 254) who will replace the minister or priest as the ideal model for self-transformation. The poet participates in the powers of nature and compresses them into the measured cadences of poetry. The minister lives out of the dead letter and kills the spirit, thus

alienating the congregation from the eternal dynamism of nature. In his later reflections, Emerson allows that the farmer, never exhibiting his reflections in verse, serves as a paradigm of how nature interacts with the human process:

The glory of the farmer is that, in the division of labors, it is his part to create. All trade rests at last on his primitive activity. He stands close to nature; he obtains from the earth the bread and the meat. The food which was not, he causes to be. The first farmer was the first man, and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of land. (1870a, 133)

Like Adam, the farmer helps to give shape to the world and to bring forth all that sustains the other orders of life. God's primal creation is recapitulated by the farmer who stands rooted in nature. Emerson shifts the emphasis away from the revelatory power of language toward the practical and efficacious work of the farmer. As an amateur farmer himself, he goes so far as to speak of "we farmers" when describing the activity of creation and preservation. The act of farming, in its quiet but sure reconstruction of local habitation, is itself a kind of inquiry into the ultimate structures of the world. In tilling a field or in planting a fence around fruit trees the farmer is learning how the eternal rhythms of the world can enhance the needs of the human process. Poetic inspiration gives way to active transformations that unveil nature and show its way to the self.

Hence both the poem and the small farm represent clearings within which eternal truths appear. The metaphor for these microcosmic structures is that of the "midworld." Unlike the unlimited 'realm' of nature *per se*, the midworld is circumscribable by the human process. It can be the subject of study and reflection and thereby point toward the macrocosmic world within which it appears. By the same token, the midworld points to the much smaller realm of the self and illuminates not only its most pervasive features but its correlation to nature as a whole. For Emerson, "The midworld is best" (1844, 337) because it provides the bond between the self and its world. Without this bond the human process would become alienated from those very forces that provide wisdom and insight.

Agriculture is an activity that reveals the basic contour of the midworld and, in turn, of nature. Emerson eulogized such activity in language that mirrored his earlier writings on the nature of poetic creation. In either case, what was sought was the method of nature as it permeates

the cosmos and thereby enters into the core of the self. Nature's internal laws become manifest in all orders of human activity but emerge in greater purity in those actions that directly alter and compress the forces of the environment. In order to show how Emerson's thought evolved toward his deepened sense of the centrality of agriculture it is necessary to detail his understanding of the method of nature itself.

Four essays stand out as conveying Emerson's sense of nature's internal logic and consequent outward expression. Of initial importance is his 1836 work, *Nature*, where he shows how nature and spirit enter into the ecstasies of the human process. His 1841 address "The Method of Nature," delivered in Waterville, Maine, advances beyond his 1836 formulations by showing in more detail how the particular participates in a universal end. His 1844 essay "Experience" betrays a growing reticence about the ability of the self to enter fully into nature's mysteries. Finally, his 1860 essay "Fate" paints a much starker and more brooding picture of those forces of nature that can and will diminish the human process. In briefly tracing through these essays, we will gain access to the changing roles of nature and the human process as they converge on the midworld that sustains their relation. Once this has been understood it will be possible to examine his understanding of how the seemingly uninspired and antipoetic realm of agriculture preserves our contact with nature.

In *Nature* Emerson struggles to articulate the most pervasive features of the world and to show how the spirit moves among the orders of nature as their animating principle. He distinguishes between two possible definitions of nature itself, one derived from the German post-Kantian Fichte, the other derived from common sense. The former definition sees nature as the not-me—that is, as all that obtains outside of the internal acts of the self. The latter definition sees nature as being constituted by essences unchanged by the self. Emerson wishes to broaden his understanding of nature in such a way as to do justice to both interpretations while finding a conception that is even more encompassing. Emersonian naturalism insists that the spirit is pervasive within nature and enters fully into the inner dynamism of the human process. Art is envisioned as the "place" where nature and its truth becomes most fully manifest.

As is often noted, Emerson uses the image of the circle or the horizon to define the measure of nature as it enters into human awareness. Metaphorically, nature can be seen as the location for the endless intersection of circles of varying size. Any given circle will be tempted to equate itself with nature per se, and this temptation must be resisted by the poet

and seer. Emerson shows the import of the concept of horizon as it relates to finite personal and economic interests:

The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them own the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title. (1836, 188)

The poet moves past all finite boundaries toward the currents of being that animate the world. If the farmer is tempted to claim ownership of the landscape, the poet knows that all such claims are quietly overturned by the eternal powers of nature that can never be owned. The poet is the primary agent of nature's revelation because of the gift of language that is itself rooted in the forces of nature. All poetic utterance is symbolic of nature, which is itself symbolic of the spirit. For the young Emerson, language is the most forceful source of revelation.

The poet is not, however, a passive recipient of the truths of nature but has the godlike ability to transform the world through poetic speech. Emerson's early idealism insists that the human mind constitutes the very shapes of reality and can reconstruct the meaning and texture of the world at will. The poet makes the world conform to thoughts:

He [the poet] unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew. Possessed himself by a heroic passion, he uses matter as symbols of it. The sensual man conforms thought to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. The one esteems nature as rooted and fast; the other as fluid, and impresses his being thereon. To him, the refractory world is ductile and flexible; he invests dust and stones with humanity, and makes them the words of the Reason. The Imagination may be defined to be, the use which the Reason makes of the material world. (1836, 210)

The mere sensual man remains in a passive state and allows brute matter to impress itself on his awareness. The poet, on the other hand, uses the Imagination, itself a mighty power, to shape a world in his image. The

imposition of form actually unhinges the world and allows its inner dynamism to emerge more clearly. In the attempt to own the land or the outer landscape, the sensual man betrays the deeper currents of being that themselves shape and reshape the orders of the world. The poet imitates this protean activity by imposing new and varied forms on experience. In this sense, the poet is an agent of nature's own drive toward eternal self-transformation. By using the human Imagination, the poet participates more directly in the movement of the world as it allows old forms to die and compels new forms to take their place.

The various positive historical religions derive their power and validation from their imitation of the forces of nature. Jesus becomes a kind of popular poet of the spirit who, because of his lack of proper poetic speech, points toward nature in a less compelling way than will the new poet. All things preach to us, and there is no longer any need to derive revelation from archaic and shopworn religions. The Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible are fragmentary and incomplete compared to the kind of direct revelation available to the common person who allows the spirit into his or her life. The human process can be made divine when it enters into the realms of spirit:

Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (1836, 217)

If we can recapitulate creation it follows that we do not need historical or textual forms of mediation to link us to the inner life of God. Such forms of mediation still have some educational value but only insofar as they give way to a direct encounter with the spirit. Nature is the source and the validation for all human religions and should be approached directly without the mediating structures that all too frequently become ends in themselves.

In 1836 Emerson privileges the poet as the new seer who will transform communal and personal life. Language does mediate between an alienated self and nature, but this unique form of mediation has a special kind of transparency. No other human activity can convey the inner logic of nature like poetic utterance. Practical activities, the provenance of the sensuous man, remain too bound to specific and finite horizons and circles. Nature speaks through the poet and not through the work of the

crafts or of industry. Of course, Emerson learned to broaden his conception of natural revelation as his own reflections on nature went past this early idealism with its excessive emphasis on Imagination and the world constituting power of the poet.

By 1841 Emerson had deepened his conception of nature so as to show the ways in which finite orders relate more directly to the infinite potency of nature. In his Waterville oration, "The Method of Nature," he develops a Neoplatonic theory of emanation that shows how all particulars struggle toward the universal. Nature is unrelenting in its sweep:

Every natural fact is an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation. If anything could stand still, it would be crushed and dissipated by the torrent it resisted, and if it were a mind, would be crazed; as insane persons are those who hold fast to one thought and do not flow with the course of nature. Not the cause, but an ever novel effect, nature descends always from above. (1841, 190-191)

While his aggressive idealism remains intact, if slightly muted, he begins to modify his perspective to show how nature enters into and shapes the orders of the world. The dynamism of nature is more clearly drawn than it was in 1836, and Emerson acknowledges how all particulars are caught in the downward movements of nature. Nature itself is in a constant process of giving birth and is in rapid metamorphosis. All finite ends are momentary and merely use particulars for their fulfillment. Nature is not so much the screen on which the poet may project any picture at will as it is the eternal seedbed of all possibilities.

Nature uses the human process for its own universal end, and there is no longer any room for the proud boasting of the world constituting poet. This shift in Emerson's perspective is profound and enabled him to develop a less eulogistic and narrow conception of nature and of the type of self that correlates to nature's laws. Instead of the sovereign power of the Imagination we have a more humble awe before the infinite:

Is a man boastful and knowing, and his own master?—we turn from him without hope: but let him be filled with awe and dread before the Vast and the Divine, which uses him glad to be used, and our eye is riveted to the chain of events. (1841, 209)

All selves are caught in the vast emanating powers of nature and must obey the momentum of nature's end or they will be crushed. Nature is indifferent to finite human ends unless they in turn serve the larger end of nature. This striking sense of human vulnerability to the infinite sweep of nature foreshadows the pessimistic naturalism of Santayana who himself came to see the utter indifference of nature to the needs and aspirations of the human process.

By 1844 Emerson's idealism had cooled even more and made it possible for him to probe into the demonic and destructive forces of the world. Many critics trace this inner transformation to the death of his son Waldo in 1842, but the inner logic of his expanding conception of nature would have moved him in this direction regardless of specific finite losses. His own intellectual honesty compelled him to deepen his understanding of the method of nature and to distance himself from his earlier emphasis on the sheer luminosity of human speech. In his 1844 essay "Experience" he presents a stark and lonely image of the human process and its relation to nature. Instead of the "transparent eyeball" of *Nature* we see an alienated self caught on an infinite stairway in which neither the origin nor goal of the stairs are visible. This metaphor compresses in one image his growing sense that it is impossible to penetrate into the mysteries of nature and thus impossible to find a secure or determinate location for the self.

The once luminous orders of the world are now little more than surfaces that deflect our blows and leave us without a sense of the inner being of the world. "Life is a bubble and a scepticism, and a sleep within a sleep" (1844, 337). The clear and distinct world of the Imagination darkens and becomes bereft of natural illumination. The self is a stranger in an indifferent world that seems uncongenial to the aspirations of the human process. Further, nature is no longer the benevolent source of truth but represents a battle field of contending and incompatible forces:

Nature, as we know her, is no saint. The lights of the church, the ascetics, Gentoos [Hindus] and corn-eaters, she does not distinguish by any favor. She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law, do not come out of the Sunday school, nor weigh their food nor punctually keep the commandments. (1844, 337)

Nature is beyond good and evil and pursues elusive ends that pulse through the self but refuse to reveal their whence or wherefore. Our

ignorance of the vast sweep of the world is one of the most striking results of cumulative experience and serves to alienate us from the heart of nature. The rhythms of nature are fragmented into pulses that move the self in a direction that cannot be fathomed. The ethical concepts of human community are little more than pale denials of a premoral universe.

The fitful starting and stopping of experience rides on the back of an even more fitful nature. The law of compensation seems more muted as the origin and goal of all action becomes shrouded in mystery. How can a fitful and seemingly indifferent nature reward or punish action if it is impossible to gauge the ultimate upshot of such acts? For good or ill, we must adjust to a world that is less rational and measured than we thought:

Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses; our organic movements are such; and the chemical and ethereal agents are undulatory and alternate; and the mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. (1844, 339)

The mind no longer partakes of the currents of the universal being but stands amid an impulsive world. The self is antagonistic and alienated from nature and can only move through the world in a fragmented way. Unity seems just beyond the reach of the human process and the laws of nature seem to recede further and further from view.

By 1844 Emerson had developed an increased skepticism, combined with a more fundamental world weariness that seemed to cut off the self from those springs of power that were so obvious to the younger Emerson. The power of spirit is likened to that of a mighty river that has been dammed upstream somewhere. The loss of innocence and power compels the self to ride on the chaotic pulses of a less than compassionate and less than rational nature. The very concepts of origin and goal are effaced so that the location of the self remains veiled in mystery. It is as if nature begins to mock the imperial self that once seemed so sure of its place in the world.

The mocking quality of nature is conveyed in Emerson's 1847 poem "The World-Soul," where he depicts the utter distance between the human soul and its world. The following stanza gives a succinct expression of this sense of distance:

Alas! the Sprite that haunts us  
Deceives our rash desire;

It whispers of the glorious gods,  
 And leaves us in the mire.  
 We cannot learn the cipher  
 That's writ upon our cell;  
 Stars taunt us by a mystery  
 Which we could never spell.  
 (1847, 24–25)

The Sprite, a personification of nature's outer face, infects the self with a restlessness that cannot be stilled. Not only is nature receding from the self, it also taunts the self in its very act of withdrawal. Our habitat is no longer the luminous horizon of *Nature* but a "cell" from which we cannot escape. Nature does write its own inner history and logic in a special cipher script but fails to provide the hermeneutic key that will make such a script come alive. All attempts to decode the mystery fail and frustrate the self even further. For Emerson, the act of writing a poem is no longer the act of creating a midworld between the self and the world but an act of resignation that acknowledges that the midworld remains elusive.

By 1860 Emerson had moved further toward a sense of nature that was not only beyond good and evil but in some deeper sense even hostile to the needs of the self. Behind the congenial façade of American life lies a blood-soaked panorama that threatens to expose itself:

The way of Providence is a little rude. The habit of snake and spider, the snap of the tiger, and other leapers and bloody jumpers, the crackle of the bones of his prey in the coil of the anaconda,—these are in the system and our habits are like theirs. You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity,—expensive races,—race living at the expense of race. (1860, 381)

Like Thoreau, Emerson came to acknowledge the utter waste and cruelty of nature and its lack of compassion for its endless stream of victims. Buried within the heart of human nature is the same tendency toward conquest and destruction as is manifest in the snake and tiger. Nature feeds off of itself as it moves toward an elusive end that may not in itself redeem the entire process of mutual devouring.

Nature's "tyrannous circumstance" binds the self to a small round of dreary existence. Positive power may struggle against circumstance but its

deliverances are feeble and often deflected from their proper orbit. Finitude seems to absorb the impulses toward transcendence and thereby deaden the power of spirit. The self is caught in an endless round of disease, famine, suicide, and loss of power. Fate overwhelms the purposes of the individual and shrinks all horizons. Temperament freezes the personality into a cycle of mere repetition, where novelty and growth are foreclosed. Emerson paints a dark picture of human prospects amid a hostile natural environment.

Yet this stark vision is not without some melioration. Fate can be challenged by power and intellect, and the destructive forces of the world can be harnessed to serve human interests. Human praxis creates its own kind of midworld in which vast torrents become mild and regular irrigation ditches; where disease and its spread can be conquered by engineering and good sanitation. The midworld of action is not that of the world-constituting poet but one that recognizes the absolute power and supremacy of the not-me. Societies absorb and redirect the energies of nature and turn them toward their own use. The midworld becomes the locus for instrumental control and for the taming of an irrational and indifferent nature. Human ends are preserved only insofar as the potencies of nature are refocused around personal and communal needs.

The evolution in Emerson's thought was profound in the period from 1838 to 1860. His conception of nature evolved to reflect his more successful probes into the innumerable orders of the world. If he overstressed the luminous power of horizons and language in his early work, he more than made up for it by coming to stress the dark and fitful events of a nature that was always just beyond human apprehension. The eulogistic tone of 1836 gave way to a world weariness and growing reticence about human powers. Nature was no longer the nurturing mother but the indifferent fate and power that surrounded and mocked the self.

The conception of the midworld followed this progression closely. The midworld of the poem gave way to a more practical and less luminous midworld of human activity. Instead of bringing nature to luminous self-transparency within language, the practical midworld dams rivers and rebuilds local landscapes to meliorate weather conditions. The practical understanding of the midworld helped Emerson find a less inflated and less honorific conception of nature *per se*.

His concern with the dignity of farming can be traced to this transition from the centrality of language toward the centrality of human productivity. Of all forms of human making, farming is the original. In carving out a field, or in draining off swampland, the farmer is harnessing

the infinite potencies of nature for ends that might not otherwise be realized. The farmer is as sensitive to the intrinsic shapes of the world as to the possibilities for change and transformation:

He bends to the order of the seasons, the weather, the soils and crops, as the sails of a ship bend to the wind. He represents continuous hard labor, year in, year out, and small gains. He is a slow person, timed to nature, and not to city watches. (1870a, 134)

The farmer sets the measure for the rest of society by slowing his pace to that of nature. Insofar as his actions are parallel to those of nature, the farmer becomes a "representative man" for the entire social order. Emerson eulogized rural over city values, yet did so in order to preserve a practical midworld against constant corrosion and self-effacement.

Interestingly, the farmer and the poet are seen to stem from the same "old Nature" and serve in different ways to open out the truths of nature. Even though Emerson grew skeptical about our ability to learn the deepest secrets of the world, he still retained a muted faith in those individuals who sustain some microcosm of intelligibility. The farmer is a hero of the stature of Achilles:

But he stands well on the world,—as Adam did, as an Indian does, as Homer's heroes, Agamemnon or Achilles, do. He is a person whom a poet of any clime—Milton, Firdusi, or Cervantes—would appreciate as being really a piece of the old Nature, comparable to sun and moon, rainbow and flood; because he is, as all natural persons are, representative of Nature as much as these. (1870, 148)

The selection and enrichment of a plot of land is an act of creation of the same ontological worth as the sacking of Troy or the life of a wandering hero. Yet the farmer works quietly and at a much slower pace than the ancient heroes. His relation to the world is one of acceptance rather than defiance, and his own spirit is without the kind of manic inflation that characterizes the tragic hero. As a representative of nature, the farmer is his own midworld and keeps the truths of nature from fading into oblivion. Consider how the farmer improves on nature by using nature's own laws to transform a hostile environment into one that is friendly:

Plant fruit-trees by the roadside, and their fruit will never be allowed to ripen. Draw a pine fence about them, and for fifty years they mature for their owner their delicate fruit. There is a great deal of enchantment in a chestnut rail or picketed pine boards.  
(1870, 142)

Protection from traffic and wind allows the fruit tree to fulfill its own *entelechy* and become useful to the farmer. The pine fence replaces or augments the poem as a fitting symbol of the midworld. Less dramatic than the self-luminous horizon of *Nature*, the simple fence points toward the potencies of nature that impinge on human commerce within the world. Agriculture is not only useful but represents a form of exploration of the orders of the world.

The exploratory power of agriculture is manifest in the simple act of laying down tiles for drainage. As the land is drained and converted to agricultural use, a rich subworld is discovered that remained hidden until human industry brought it into the open:

By drainage we went down to a subsoil we did not know, and have found there is a Concord under old Concord, which we are now getting the best crops from; a Middlesex under Middlesex; and in fine, that Massachusetts has a basement story more valuable and that promises to pay a better rent than all the superstructure. (1870, 145)

The midworld of farming reveals features of nature that would otherwise have remained beyond human ken. Note that none of this activity requires poetic speech or the solemn cadencies of poetic language. Emerson came more and more to understand that the simplest activities could reveal as much as the most exalted. Farming, unlike modern industry, still conforms to the deeper rhythms of nature and mirrors nature's laws.

Agriculture thus guides both the poet and the ordinary person toward the deeply embedded truths of the world. If the midworld of farming is less intense and dramatic than that of the poem, it compensates by being more secure and efficacious within the community. The farmer, like Adam, builds and maintains the microcosm of truth that can still guide and transform society. Were a society to ignore its farmers, the true poets of the landscape, it would risk breaking all contact with nature. From this would follow an increased alienation from the potencies that still infuse

the world. If the farmer settles for less wisdom and less clarity than the poet, it is because human praxis must always start, *in medias res* and work more quietly toward origins and goals. We may indeed be on an endless stairway that hides its beginning and end but our practical actions enable us to transverse this infinity with measured step and sure gaze. The farmer says little compared to the poet, yet lays down deep traces of nature through the midworld of agriculture. In learning to read the more modest script of agriculture we gain that wisdom that knows the limits of the human while remaining open to transcendence.