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1. P. J. Wingate, "The Philosophy of H. L. Mencken," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, April 20, 1983, p. 95.
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Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter

John McAleer

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x + 748pp.

For the philosopher, Emerson exerts a strange and elusive lure. On the one hand he seems to provide little more than literary fascination, for his evocative use of metaphor and image. On the other hand he continues to compel interest for his daring attempts to probe into the intimate contacts between the divine and the orders of nature. Most thinkers would agree that he has advanced the literary imagination and has thereby secured his place in any serious history of American letters. Yet it is still unclear as to his proper role within the history of American metaphysics. Of course, such a distinction would have been inimical to Emerson and we violate his spirit and intent when we frame the problem in this manner. Yet such an inquiry is inevitable in a time when we are struggling for a new definition of American thought which goes beyond the previous overemphasis on pragmatism and instrumentalism. Emerson's relation to the tradition remains problematic.

Writing in 1870, Charles Eliot Norton, in many respects an admirer of Emerson, presented a strikingly negative perspective on the future importance of his thought:

No best man with us has done more to influence the nation than Emerson, but the country has in a sense outgrown him. He was the friend and helper of its youth; but for the difficulties and struggles of its manhood we need the wisdom

of the reflective and rational understanding, not that of the intuitions. (p. 619)

For many, this perspective is compelling. We would be more inclined to look for an American Schopenhauer who could force us to face the serious flaws in the cosmic and social orders. That Emerson could maintain his faith in intuition and moral compensation in the midst of the horrors of the Civil War seems evidence for his ability to hide from the bite of the actual rather than for a unique moral strength. Were we to disagree with Norton's assessment, we would almost certainly have the burden of proof on our side.

One of the virtues of McAleer's exhaustive biography is just this ability to present the strongest possible case for the continuing relevance of Emerson. While McAleer comes to Emerson from the side of literature, and hence would be able to exempt himself from the apologetic task of defending his philosophical horizon, he argues throughout that Emerson did arrive at conclusions which can be defended in the contemporary context. Yet he makes his points without falling prey to reigning literary or philosophical fashions. This freedom from ideological bias makes McAleer's book a valuable contribution to an already ample supply of Emerson biographies.

Unlike previous biographies, such as those of Ralph L. Rusk and Gay Wilson Allen, McAleer's presents Emerson from the perspective of his numerous friendships and encounters. Instead of a linear progression from birth to death, McAleer presents a series of ellipses which intersect with the Emersonian trajectory at various stages of its career. The reader is pulled along the pathways of friendships which emerge and recede with an oftentimes confusing rapidity. Any given chapter may take the reader from the 1830's to the 1870's in the compass of a few pages. The core which is Emerson becomes elusive.

Yet this seeming defect is actually one of the unique strengths of the book. We are put into a position to see Emerson from a variety of perspectives not his own. These 'external' reflections present a surprisingly consistent contour which gives us access to Emerson by indirection. To see Emerson from the viewpoint of Hawthorne or

of Coleridge is to catch a glimpse into an elusive interior. The moral pessimism of Hawthorne and the militant Trinitarianism of the elder Coleridge cast searchlights into the heart of the optimistic Unitarian and etch a shape not as clear before. Carlyle's petulant animosity against Emersonian optimism is presented with masterful detail and humor, offering further evidence that one of the best forms of biography is such an elliptical movement around the frequently opaque central figure.

Unlike Allen, McAleer does not stress Emerson's driving ambition to become a world famous figure. Instead, the emphasis shifts to Emerson's struggle to become a truly representative or universal man. Emerson's intense interest in acquiring his first wife's inheritance is described in terms of Yankee sagacity rather than in terms of worldly ambition to secure financial power and independence. Throughout, McAleer downplays what C. G. Jung called the "shadow" which expresses itself in sexual and aggressive forms. Of course, like previous commentators, McAleer does show that Emerson's relation to Margaret Fuller was fraught with erotic elements that Fuller understood better than Emerson. Fuller is referred to as Emerson's "spiritual concubine" (p. 404). Yet Emerson is presented as a person genuinely aloof from the fulsome eroticism of some of his followers. Any hint of a homoerotic dimension in the young Emerson is ignored. Allen, on the other hand, took great pains to detail such possibilities in his biography.

Of particular interest is McAleer's plea for the importance of Emerson's oft neglected 1841 essay, "The Method of Nature." Originally delivered in Waterville, Maine, this essay radicalized Emerson's thought beyond the already daring structure of the 1838 "Divinity School Address" which so scandalized the overseers of Harvard. Nature is seen to drive toward an expression of the universal. The Plotinian understanding of emanation becomes the mechanism by which the universal emerges. Emerson states:

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.¹

The theme of emanation-return becomes increasingly fundamental to Emerson after his original statement, in *Nature*, of the power of the divine in the orders of the world. McAleer rightly points to the persistence of Plotinian themes throughout Emerson's writings. The Waterville oration moves beyond the 1838 address by stressing that nature itself drives toward the universal and pays scant attention to the merely particular. The emanation of the Spirit 'downward' into nature bursts through the condescended particulars that claim an illusory self-sufficiency. The process of universalization is completed by the genius/poet who gathers nature's potencies together into a work which lets the emanating Spirit house itself for a brief time.

A basic theme of this essay is that reform, whether individual or social, takes place through an imitation of the method of nature. Particular causes or attachments remain outside of the vast sweep of a universe struggling for generic expansion and encompassment of the individual. Emerson's profound ambivalence about the various reforms of his day stems, at least in part, from his sense that moral reformers as a class express particular and distorted ends rather than the universal ends of nature. His implied psychology of the reformer casts suspicion on those persons who would elevate a given cause above the soul's liberation and moral evolution.

Yet Emerson did, when the time was ripe, face the moral dilemmas of his time with courage and vision. McAleer gives a definitive account of the gradual emergence of a clear and sincere social dimension in Emerson's thought. This political sensitivity became sharper in 1838 when President Van Buren ordered the expulsion of the Cherokee peoples from their lands in Georgia. Emerson was compelled to write a stinging letter to the President condemning his action in the strongest possible terms. The Emerson who could write, "You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if

your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world," could scarcely be called a moral coward (p. 243).

The ambivalence of Emerson on such social questions is well defined by McAleer:

The matter of the Cherokee was one that Emerson had been familiar with for some time. As would happen with abolition, which, as a popular cause touching on the grievances of an oppressed minority, it in several ways paralleled, Emerson faced up to it slowly and reluctantly. He had neither the stamina nor the inclination to commit himself to campaigns on social issues, stubbornly insisting that the first step to remedying social ills was for men to reform themselves. He groaned, he writhed, yet in the final test he did not flinch. (p. 240)

Emerson's awakening social conscience is traced back at least to 1838, yet it is also clear that the reform of the individual soul was held to have profound social consequences. McAleer reminds us that Emerson was courageous enough to house John Brown and to defend his abolitionist stance at a time when such a position was not popular. If Thoreau and others occasionally had to prod him into action, it is evidence of Emerson's sincerity that such prods usually found their mark.

Throughout, McAleer presents an Emerson of unwavering compassion and courage. He endured many friendships that others would have early on left behind, as a drain on scarce emotional and spiritual resources. In particular, we are shown how Emerson stoically endured the crabbed and bitter utterances of Carlyle during their ill-fated reunion in 1848. Emerson's loyalty to a friendship already faded and worn is presented in all of its moral grandeur. On the domestic front, McAleer gives us new insights into Emerson's strained relations with his second wife. Lidian's severe depressions and neurasthenic illnesses are presented without dilution. Emerson's oft-noted lack of erotic passion can now be traced, at least in part, to the profound psycho-

logical invalidism of his wife. The only hint of a bitter note comes in a brief statement made to Margaret Fuller during one of their long walks near Walden Pond. As with Carlyle, Emerson remained faithful to the original impulses of his friendships long after such impulses had cooled.

Emerson's personal friendships form the bulk of material in this volume yet the emergence of his philosophic perspective is not neglected. In particular, McAleer traces Emerson's early interest in nature and the influence of Aunt Mary Moody Emerson on his growing sensitivity to the fields and woods in and around Concord. In 1823, over a decade before he wrote *Nature*, he writes of his experiences with the scenery around greater Boston:

A pair of moonlight evenings have screwed up my esteem several pegs higher by supplying my brain with several bright fragments of thought, & making me dream that mind as well as body respired more freely here. And there is an excellence in Nature which familiarity never blunts the sense of — a serene superiority to man & his art in the thought of which man dwindles to pigmy proportions. In short, parti-colored Nature makes a man love his eyes. (p. 68)

Several years before his crisis of vocation over the ministry, Emerson sought and received consolation from nature. His sensitivity for the metaphors buried in local scenes became increasingly sharpened as he matured. Throughout his journals of this period he struggled to find his way toward an articulation of the presence of the divine in the orders of both art and untrammelled nature.

In 1822 Emerson wrote in his journal:

He who wanders in the woods perceives how natural it was to pagan imagination to find gods in every deep grove & by each fountain head. Nature seems to him not to be silent but to be eager & striving to break out into music. Each tree, flower, and stone, he invests with life & character; and it is impossible that the wind which breathes so expressive a sound amid the leaves — should mean nothing.²

Nature breaks into unhiddenness through the power of metaphor which gives "character" to the complexes of the surrounding world. The monotheistic God of traditional Unitarianism is threatened with a splintering into an endless series of incarnated spirits each sustained by a unique metaphor. The real pressure to orthodox theology emerges from these early reflections on the multiple location of Spirit in the orderly and vitalistic realms of nature. Long before the "Divinity School Address" Emerson had embarked on a perilous theological journey which quickly propelled him outside of the fold of his church. His crisis of vocation can be traced back to these initial forays into a nature pregnant with metaphor and Spirit.

Unlike Allen, McAleer does not detail the theological disputes between the Unitarians and the more orthodox Congregationalists. Nor does he place as much emphasis on East Asian influences as does Allen. Yet he does exert great care in his perhaps infrequent chapters on Emerson's philosophical development. He downplays the supposed shift in Emerson's thinking after the untimely death of his son Waldo and argues that the fundamental metaphysical optimism remains undimmed.

The entire biography is cast in a heroic mold that might seem idiosyncratic to contemporary minds, yet for those sympathetic to the notion that Emerson was a truly great man, this angle of vision will be a welcome one.

The Pennsylvania State University

Robert S. Corrington

NOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), pp. 190-91.
2. Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, edited by Joel Porte (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 15.

