

TOWARD A THEOLOGY
OF EROS

Transfiguring Passion at
the Limits of Discipline

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♣ American Transcendentalism's Erotic Aquitecture

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There are two high-water marks in the self-unfolding of the depths of nature within Euro-American thought. The earlier occurred in the neo-Plotinian transfiguration of our experience of infinitizing nature in the metaphorical undulations condescended in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The latter emerged in the dazzling architectonic of the creator of pragmatism and the greater triadic tradition of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce—overpowering the subsequent dyadic semiological trajectory inspired by Saussure. For Emerson, the astonishing and fecund power of nature naturing held forth the fitful and often explosive power of the great One, while for Peirce sheer firstness, the predyadic dimension of immediacy, traitless fecundity *an sich*, and nonsemiotic radiance, served as the brake on the manic centrifugal force of the phenomenological and ontological categories of secondness (dyadic causal impact) and thirdness (concrete reasonableness in an evolutionary context).

Peirce was profoundly transformed by the thought of Schelling, to whom he remained indebted, yet he sanitized the brooding and dangerous intuition Schelling had into the underconscious of nature—an underconscious from which even gods and goddesses emerge. While Peirce had a glimmering of the depth of nature, as the spawning ground of both signs and refracted light, he turned his back on this dimension over and over again in his flight toward evolutionary love and the conquest of sheer firstness by a blinding and self-enfolding categorial array awaiting

him in the infinite long run of an evolutionary perspective that was only minimally Darwinian.

For Peirce, the universe is like a great breathing architecture gathering up its distressed foundlings and weaving them into an increasingly crystalline realm of thirdness. Rather than stressing the evolutionary principles of random variation, natural selection, adaptability, and a minimal form of self-organization under the rare conditions emergent from a surplus value of evolutionary competence, he imposed a Lamarckian mythos of evolutionary love in which all variation served the higher good of convergence. Peirce's fear of and complicit desire for the abyss of sheer firstness drove him into a titanic effort to pull thirdness out of a reluctant nature. This countermove to the Schelling-like domain of firstness was his biggest mistake—and one that Peircean scholastics reenact with him.

Like the Wittgenstein of the 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Peirce, a chemist by academic training, felt most at home in crystalline imagery. If the boisterous and fuzzy universe was not yet a pure self-reflecting crystal, it would be. And the method of science serves to bring the counterfactual *would be* into the infinite facets of the divine crystal. The primary metaphor in his philosophical anthropology, taken from Shakespeare, is that we are a "glassy essence"—our internal semiosis being a clear and distinct microcosmic mirror of the macrocosmic sign-series, always infinite, that molded it. The method of science provides the self-control necessary to align the optics of the self with the optics of God. Yet the God problematic remains curiously incomplete in Peirce's philosophical theology. It is truncated, contradictory, and self-masking. It reminds one of Michelangelo's unfinished slave sculptures in which the figures are almost pushing their way out of stone, but are somehow held back by a mocking opacity.

It may take another century for philosophy to fully grasp the legacy deposited in Peirce's writings, but the case for Emerson seems different—seems, but may not be. For surely Emerson's essays, journals, poems, and even translations have been the subject of much appreciative scrutiny. And they are certainly not as internally complex as are the writings of Peirce. But is this so, or only a delusion produced by an easy and lazy familiarity with a figure hoary with age and properly enshrined in the

North Atlantic pantheon of those who shaped the contours of our increasingly complex meaning horizons? The case to be made is a strenuous one, but not impossible; namely, that Emerson's writings are among the most difficult, profound, and evocative of the One in the English language. For a philosopher of some sophistication to be told that Emerson's essays rank with the writings of Peirce in the above characteristics, would produce both a wry smile and a self-important incredulity. But the tale is yet to be adequately told and it may take another century before *this* story finds its proper measure within the continuing self-giving of the infinite light.

Stepping outside of the magic circle one last time—indeed, we have yet to properly enter into it—Peirce always writes within a Christian eschatological context. The universe, and the divine engine within it, is evolving from the less perfect to the more perfect, from the tantalizing but terrible fecundity of firstness to the clear, clean, crisp, and unambiguous realm of divine self-return in the glowing architecture of thirdness—god, as universe, sure and whole at the end of a journey that may not have been real in the first place. And even in his concept of evolutionary love, which has a highly muted erotics, the outcome is secure, the journey marked with clear guideposts, and the relationality of the consummated realm prevailing without any dangerous movement that would tear into the serene divine mind.

A primal intuition tells us that a crystalline world is not an erotic world. It is not a world that surges, retreats, burrows into itself, explodes out of a tremulous underconscious, and lives as a boundary-in-the-making in an elliptical pluriform. Moving toward the charmed circle of Emerson's writings, several striking features emerge as we turn away from Peirce's triumphalism toward the deceptively serene fields and streams of Concord. The pilgrim is struck by a great silence that envelops the problematics of history, god, progress, the scope of science and scientism, and the very concept of consummatory eschatology. Peirce's titanic unity has somehow splintered—tumbling away from the Christian metahistory that brooks no opposition. It is still here, but now scattered and underground, no longer forced along a great arc of history and compelled by a brutal hand to be an antientropic arrow pointing only to the divine mind. The convergent unified force of evolutionary love has devolved

into the nonhistoric explosions of innumerable foldings and unfoldings within the orders of nature.

This great leap into the prehistorical was made in Emerson's youth by Schopenhauer, another slayer of the Christian eschaton. Radicalized in his vision by his encounter with the Upanishads, Schopenhauer created the first truly post-monotheistic philosophy of genius within the many Western traditions. Emerson did not need the Upanishads to find the measure of the midworld of Eastern Massachusetts, but it became his companion on subsequent journeys through much vaster landscapes. A curious internal mix started brewing while Emerson was intuiting his way toward the creation of Transcendentalism out of the ashes of a failed Unitarianism still wedded to a supernatural Christology and a progressive (ameliorative) eschatology.

Emerson had little genius for architectonic, for the gathering together of massive categorial structures into a grounded yet aspiring thought experiment. For the philosophical architect, grounds are available and even transformable into a structure that weds antecedent to consequent through the once-and-for-all bridge of sufficient reason. Bridges of this nature have a curious tendency to spawn historical consequents that flee from the self-giving ground and drive toward the gathering of a seductive and authoritative "not yet." After all, an edifice has to last, to hold to the last, and to find its measure in the solar power of a lucid and mirroring counter-light that shines in and as history. Architectonic in the Christian horizon is strangely moving toward the place within *chronos* where history finally comes to a stop—all light, all luminosity, and all burning fire. The earthly weight of architectonic marries itself to the fire of the eschaton and the very need for a vast categorial array dissolves in the plasma that is hotter than the heat of any sun, of any supernova, of anything whatsoever within the indefinitely ramified orders of the world.

Emerson would have none of this. His internal alchemy bodied forth something far more elusive and more tenuous (at least from the perspective of the not so discerning eye of the absolute idealist—hell-bent on establishing a vision of strict internal relations among the moments of a totalizing consciousness). Emerson took his world in small units, in small pulsations that emerged before and within him as he endlessly walked among the quotidian organic invitations of his midworld. Everywhere he

looked he saw the dissolving waters that surround each order of nature. Metaphors, always his chief guide in probing into the infinitizing powers of nature naturing, were offered to him by each tree, each grove, each meaningful human act, and, most forcefully, by his vision of the sheer luminosity of the nighttime sky. His very notion of religion, of the cultic embodiment of the sacred, had its highest epiphany in a kind of people's astronomy. Were the stars to appear only one night in a thousand years, he opined, the memory of their photonic shower would be enough to fuel all of the religions of the world, making our contemporary historical religions but pale and all-too-human imitations.

Agape belongs to the architects, to those who always build for the solar array that pours its authoritative benediction on those laboring below. The philosophical architect wrenches metals and silicates out of the soil of sufficient reason and melds them into the structure that awaits solar transformation and blessing. Eros comes from a different dimensionality and is most clearly seen in its dissolving and binding power within horizontal midworlds that move not toward the agapastic sun but through the liquid steams and torrents of nature natured, always the dim refraction of nature naturing, from whence all liquefactions come. Emerson knew this, and knew it from the beginning as his Unitarian soul was carried over a cataract that only later received its proper name: nature naturing, or nature producing itself out of itself alone, never confined to what is created, to the innumerable orders of the world.

Five years after publishing his inaugural essay "Nature" (1836), an essay that brought human religious self-consciousness to its then highest level within the context of the emerging post-Protestant world, he delivered an important address in Waterville, Maine. This address, "The Method of Nature" (August 11, 1841), opened the sluice gates of his nascent erotic aquatecture. It is one of the most significant documents in the early prehistory of the world theology that is experiencing its birth pangs in the current era. For in it Emerson is carried into consciousness by forces that are but barely understood and are certainly not subject to the ameliorative self-control that drove Peirce's cosmology.

Nature is methodic, but in a way that shatters all that we mean by that concept. It is method *as* nature or nature *as* method, rather than being a detached nature that could *have* a method, as if in addition to some other

possibilities. Peirce's nature has the method of instantiating thirdness—the power of which comes from the divine crystal consciousness. Emerson gives us something raw and untamed:

The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. The bird hastens to lay her egg: the egg hastens to be a bird. The wholeness we admire in the order of the world is the result of infinite distribution. Its smoothness is the smoothness of the pitch of the cataract. Its permanence is a perpetual inchoation. 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.¹

Threads are forever, infinite sign series with neither beginning nor end. All is emanation but seemingly no emanator of all emanators, no ultimate ground, only groundings, better yet, only outpourings into vessels that can't long remain vessels. Even cornerstones have no place to land, no architecture to support, no fixed place on a soil that is forever dissolving under roaring cataracts that are inexhaustible—cataracts coming from we know not where, overpowering us and eternally fueled by rain, melting snow, or even, in the mysterious world of the underconscious of nature, by drought. Churning and erupting water is everywhere, but here there is no hint of the gentle Tao that also lives in the water world of indefinite elisions. The Tao is far too tame, a product of a mountain-high fantasyland that is safely above the turgid valleys below.

This indefinite and endless ramification of an aquitecture, that is unlike any other kind of architecture, is too frenzied, bereft of a whence and a whither, to provide, let alone sustain, the antecedent to consequent relation of sufficient reason. Emerson's vision sweeps away Leibniz, Royce, Whitehead, and all other architects who struggle to hold forth grounds when nature scoffs at their efforts. Whether the grounds be

pluniform (monads, actual occasions, Cantorian self-referential infinite sets), or monadic, (absolute consciousness, substance), they stand but a moment before the all-dissolving aqueducture that is nature; that is, nature creating itself (endlessly) out of itself alone.

You search in vain for any hint of the arc of history, of the eventual "would be" that will conclude history and bring it into a final consummatory blaze of glory—and shame for those outside of the arch of the sacred. For where would history be if there is no initiating event, no mythos of founding heroes, no first cities, or no castrating tribal deities serving imperial and militaristic interests? What would be the goal of nature if all structures are little more than momentary and feeble constructs awaiting the inevitable dissolution from the universal solvent? As a chemist Peirce knew the name of this solvent, but he desperately wanted a world in which it would remain encased in a silicate, hidden under the chemist's work bench—always just out of reach.

Contrary to highly grooved and canned theories, Emerson's Transcendentalism is made of stern stuff, demanding the utmost in spiritual courage in the face of a nature that would as soon see our species snuffed out as give birth to yet another evolutionary random variation—a variation, alas, that will in all likelihood die almost as soon as it emerges. Decades before Darwin Emerson faced into the sheer raw power and absolute indifference of nature. Yet at the same time he saw that our attunement to the method of nature can save us from madness, fanaticism, and obsessional delusion. For we are mad to the extent that we attempt to impose our own feeble methods onto the "torrent" that ultimately comes from the underconscious of the world.

And where is erotics in this infinite liquefaction? Is not eros the bond that holds the modes of being together? Is it not, as Karl Jaspers argued, the bond of the modes of the encompassing—perhaps his term, seen through a glass darkly, for nature naturing? And what of the strange spatiality of eros as seen in traditional Christian dogmatics? For we are told that agape always comes down from above, a gift or blessing from the perfect to the imperfect—a gift always undeserved and somehow ontologically alien to finite creatures who face their nonbeing with anxiety. While eros, we are told, is a movement from the lower toward the higher, a movement not of gift giving but of longing. This longing is for

an ecstatic infusion, a kind of positive psychoanalytic transference, in which the divine commingles with our nature. Down or up, that is the key discriminandum.

And what, for Emerson, are we to do with these spatial terms, terms obviously parasitic on a stable architectonic in which the directionality of the solar power is always above the horizon, on an ecliptic that never varies—constant and radiant, having no other stellar power in its domain? Clearly Transcendentalism has no place in its aquatecture for a vertical and aloof solar crystal that gives out all light. Agape, as traditionally understood, simply cannot prevail in a world of endless emanations where the very concept of *von oben* is rendered moot. As Emerson reiterates elsewhere, we are on a set of infinite stairs where neither their beginning nor their *telos* are in view, indeed, they never can be in view given the nature of nature. If agape has no between to traverse, standing as it does on a great height from which it pours its spermatic power down on the groundlings, where, on the other hand, is the little sprite eros to be found? Or is eros not such a Platonic messenger after all, not a denizen of the smaller between-world transiting between the mortals and the shining ones? Endless and recurrent personifications aside, what is eros that so much is made of it? Or are we on yet another fool's errand projecting our own traits, much magnified, onto the endlessly ramifying orders of infinitizing nature?

Before we can let eros enter into the erratic rhythms of the method of nature we need to open out the most important dimensionality of nature, a dimensionality that forms the ultimate clearing within Emerson's (and our) aquatecture. Three years after his Waterville address, Emerson published *Essays: Second Series* (1844), the text so beloved by Nietzsche. In the sixth essay, fittingly entitled "Nature," he unveils the Transcendentalist version of what Heidegger called the "ontological difference":

But taking timely warning, and leaving many things unsaid on this topic, let us not longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee, flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes (as the ancient represented nature by Proteus, a

shepherd), and in undescrivable variety. It publishes itself in creatures, reaching from particles and specula [a small hard-pointed body], through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a shock or a leap.²

Implied here is also the obverse to *natura naturans*, that is, to this first dimension of nature in its unending self-othering fecundity. The second and unfolded manifest dimension of nature is *natura naturata*; namely, the innumerable orders of the world, orders that, in their endless ramifications and ordinal locations, can never be counted, never contained, never unified into some alleged superorder or transordinal container. The domains of nature natured are never in something larger, nor are they enveloped by something manifest that would be of greater scope.

Heidegger's ontological difference between Being and things-in-being, for all of its multilayered complexity, lacks the more shocking and dramatic sweep of Emerson's ontological, nay, natural difference between nature naturing and nature natured. In the spirit of Irigaray's water love, we can say that Heidegger's world, especially the ringing of the fourfold of earth, sky, gods, and mortals, lacks the universal solvent that could dissolve the manic mythos of the Teutonic tribe lost in reverie as it stands under the solar power that roots it in blood and soil.

And wherever Being goes its shadow self non-Being goes, a troubling disturbance that was quickly but artificially overcome by Hegel in the opening gambits of his great *Logic*. Non-being is a cunning obstacle to the sweep of Being, or perhaps a sweet underground lover that nestles into the heart of a blazing Being that yet strangely hides its brilliance from the object-intoxicated human process. Lover or cunning antagonist, non-Being is never far from the citadel of Being itself.

But what can be said of the depth-correlation between nature naturing and nature natured? Is it at all analogous to the love/hate relationship between Being and non-Being? Or is it something else entirely? And if it is something else, is it at all related to a nontribal eros that seems to demand its place in the pulsations of Emersonian aquatecture? We start with the relationship and move on to the relata. How does nature naturing, that ever elusive spawning ground, never itself a natural complex or

order with traits, relate to that which is unfolded from within its seemingly closed-off infolding?

Being, non-Being, and things-in-being form a triad in which modes of self-othering and envelopment move back and forth in a circle that only seems open. Being and non-Being are different from each other, while neither is the same with those innumerable things-in-being that, for many, constitute the scope and boundary of that which has meaning. For Heidegger, leaps, abysses, and forms of nongrounding ground, hold open a deep between that, for us at least, lacks intimacy. The subtle and almost haunting transition to the experience of enownment (*Ereignis*) partly ameliorates the fierce power of the ontological difference, but still leaves us with a Nietzsche-like Homeric contest—an agonistic struggle in which the outcome is ensnared in the dark meshes of a self-giving and, above all, self-withholding history.

Eros is covered over in this historical Heideggerian world. But with Emerson we find something that allows eros into the free play of the natural difference. For while Being has its opposite, its oppositional non-partner (or hidden pseudo-partner) in non-Being, Emerson's nature has no opposite. There is nothing that is not natural, nothing that is somehow outside of nature. The fissure opened up *within* nature, namely that between nature naturing and nature natured is in no way disruptive of the absolute ubiquity of nature. It is a modal distinction within that which, *an sich*, is not modal. Nature is what it is, is only what it is, is never more than it is, and never less than it is—even as it self-fissures into the deeply bound modalities of *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*.

Strictly, you cannot separate out the two halves of the natural difference, any more than nature does. Nature naturing and nature natured are not held apart by the historicizing of history (a kind of *Heilsgeschichte* or *Seinsgeschichte*), but by a fissuring that is always and already bound together by the gathering potencies of eros. The depth-relationship, better put, the modalities of relevance, between nature naturing and nature natured is not held together by some kind of network of internal relations, nor by external causal relations, nor, finally, by the principle of sufficient reason which always brings in too much monolithic explanation too soon. Eros is the inner and entwined movement that holds the modalities of nature naturing and nature natured together, always and in

all respects. Emerson's aquatecture is above all a depth-phenomenology of the erotic entwining of the twin primal dimensionalities of nature. Nature naturing is no more or less real than the innumerable orders of nature natured. The principle of ontological parity compels us to let go of any sense of the more or less real, any sense of a chain of Being in which some discriminanda participate in their own devolution as they somehow find themselves with less Being in the cosmic drama.

Eros lives in the fluidity of the natural difference. There is no spatial or temporal place from which eros is absent in the great self-fissuring. For Emerson, the depth-momentum of his aquatecture is prespatial, pretemporal, and presemiotic. Eros lives in and through both dimensionalities of the natural difference. Its most dynamic liquefaction is found within the eternally self-renewing nonhistorical giving of world. Aquatecture is what it is through its erotics, an erotics that sustains, but never conquers, the nonspatial torrent that lives in the great between, the modalizing of nature that comes to us in those rare and fitful moments of ecstatic release echoing forth out of ontological, not neurotic, melancholy.

The relationship between (if this word is not already too aggressive, too spatial) nature naturing and nature natured, is what it is in and through the erotics of an aquatecture that is neither hierarchal nor a form of greater consciousness. Eros prevails without intentionality, without a conscious sense of history, and indeed, is not conscious at all. The erotics that plays in and through the natural difference is effortless and unending. Eros has no beginning and has no terminus. The predicates of time, space, causality, ordinal location, semiotic structure, and scope have no relevance in the aquatecture of the natural difference.

The greater torrent prevails in the entwining of the always already entwining natural difference. As torrent, it keeps open the aquascape that enables the natural difference to be at all. Eros, in this primal modality of all modalities, is the potency within the greater torrent, a torrent that comes from nowhere in particular and goes to no "wheres" at all. Eros is the potency that makes all subsequent actualizations possible, but eros is never a seedbed of eternal thoughts nor is it a blueprint of what nature builds. Eros is the *ur*-relationship that enables ordinal (worldly) relations to obtain at all.

The relata, the innumerable potencies entwined with the potency of eros (nature naturing), and the innumerable orders that have no outer boundary or inner core, are entwined erotically in their own way. But with the case of nature naturing, it is impossible to probe into its depth-dimension—this remains just on the other side of all phenomenological description or transcendental argument.

Within the primal relationship that is the natural difference, eros meets no resistance, no Peircean secondness, which would damn up its aquatic unfolding. But when the focus shifts to the partly knowable dimension of nature, the innumerable orders of the world (the second relation of the twin relata of nature naturing and nature natured), it becomes clear to our phenomenological reflection that eros is bound up with powers and structures of resistance that limit its scope (in this modality where scope is relevant) and seem to impose an ossification on its movement of encompassing. Metaphorically it is as if many orders of nature become armored against a moving aquatecture that is less “interested” in constricted vessels than with the potency of endless emanations. Here the lesser torrents that wash out the ossified internalities of the world’s orders have limited scope, have more compressed channels within which to move.

Partly one could say that to prevail, to have traits that are in some sense unique (the principle of individuation) is to resist that which would dissolve or liquefy those traits. This being so, eros is confined, is blocked, is sometimes rendered powerless when it steps outside of the modalizing of the natural difference and enters into the provenance of the indefinitely ramified orders of the world. On this side of the natural difference, erotic encompassment is, perhaps by necessity, always within certain orders in certain respects, but subject to forms of entropy—not only of heat loss and disorder, but of the entropy of nonrelevance, of nonmeaning, or even antimeaning. The worldly aquatecture of eros is limited by structures of resistance, to forms of armoring that are antecedent and recurrent. In the world, eros is neither omnipotent nor omniscient.

Eros, the potency within the endless torrent of the aquatecture of nature, lives in, through and around the natural difference. In the ever-opening that is the natural difference eros is itself the measure, the giving of measure for the difference itself. Yet when it appears in the endless

modalities, endless forms of semiosis, and endless traits of the world it is no longer effortless, no longer the ever-simple entwining that is at the same time strange liquidity. Eros, intraworldly eros, both gives and receives measure. It is indeed a nature sprite, moving horizontally among orders that resist its liquefaction. But it is a sprite of a higher order (if we may echo Schleiermacher). Ordinal to be sure, but somehow this eros is more than a wood sprite that plays the trickster for unwary mortals. Perhaps we could say that the eros of the natural difference is the between, while the eros of the world of indefinite and recalcitrant orders, is caught in the numerous betweenes that punctuate its life.

The greater eros and the lesser eros are, of course, deeply bound together. But here we can say that the emanated, the lesser eros and its various ordinal locations, is intimately tied to the greater eros, the greater torrent. The greater eros is not a ground from which one could move. It is more like a momentum that makes emanations, unfoldings, possible. Yet as even Emerson knew, there is a prior of all priors, a light behind all lights, an erotics within all manifest erotics. Coiled within the unfoldings of our liquefied cosmos is the primal infolding that is deeper even than the natural difference itself. It is the *Quelle*, the source for all that is, of the four Greek elements and of all erotics that serve this infolded mystery.