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4-2008

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Eveleth, Lois M., "Emerson's Transparent Eyeball" (2008). *Faculty and Staff - Articles & Papers*. 6.
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Emerson's Transparent Eyeball

Lois M. Eveleth

The essay *Nature* was published in September 1836, Emerson's first published work. He has given us some hint of his lofty purpose in his Journal: *The good of publishing one's thoughts is that of hooking to you likeminded men, and of giving to men whom you value...one hour of stimulated thought.* (June 20, 1835). Only five hundred copies were actually printed, and response was not enthusiastic at first. If he did not *hook* any likeminded men to himself in 1836 through this publication, he was clearly doing so in person, in and around Concord, Massachusetts. It was in 1836 that the Hedge Club was begun, a discussion group that became the foundation of the whole Transcendentalist movement. This particular essay was a foundation document of that movement, whether we wish to speak of Transcendentalism as a philosophy or as one dimension of the broad cultural movement called *Romanticism*.

The dualism of philosophy and literature that characterizes the Romantic movement provides us with a strategy for reading Emerson's essays especially. In his case, though, where the interpretation through the years has been primarily literary in character, it is his philosophical side that merits our more deliberate attention. From a philosophical perspective, Emerson is difficult, a difficulty accounted in part by the eclectic nature of his world view. Throughout the essays one finds such diverse elements as Neo-Platonism, Buddhism, and Scottish Common Sense philosophy.

This essay is comprised of eight sections, a preamble followed by seven ways to describe the interaction of man with the natural world, or, in a more Emersonian phrasing, man within OverSoul. Within the preamble the very curious, now-famous line occurs, viz. *I become a transparent eyeball.* Earliest attention to this line may have been generated by the cartoon drawing of it by Christopher Cranch, but the legacy of this sentence is nobler. I am claiming that it expresses the

unique role of humanity within nature, viz. that man is nature's effort at knowing itself.

The foundationalism generated by Descartes' search for a secure foundation for his knowledge established modern epistemology whose mainstream conversation was dominated by empiricism and rationalism. Emerson, however, rejected this dominance and cannot be understood in its terms. Foundationalism, in its separation of knower from known, answered one question by raising another, viz. how the connection between knower and known is to be understood. Emerson was exempt from the need to secure a connection between knowing subject and known object, because, for him, unity was a given. We are all, in his words, part and parcel of the OverSoul. In this sense, then, his metaphysics took priority over his epistemology.

This particular liberation did not leave him free, however; one burden was gone, only to be replaced by another. If unity be a given, how can he explain diversity? What is the basis of individualism, then? If he is to preach a new gospel of self-reliance, how is the self to be understood and explained? The preamble to the essay *Nature* offers an answer.

The key is a theory of perception emerging here, his first published effort to explain individualism. We read in the landscape passage:

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 owns the landscape.
There is a property in the horizon which no man has but
he whose eye can integrate all the parts... (emersoncentral,2008)

Perception is integration. Integration of what? He uses the word 'impressions': *...all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.* The word *impression*, though, is unfortunate, I believe, because it is owned by empiricists Locke and Hume, and a reader soon learns that Emerson is making something else out of it. His impressions are not solid, defined and ready-made, like those of empiricism, but are shaped by the observer integrating such impressions. However it is that "...natural objects make a kindred impression...", and Emerson does not explain here how impressions are

made, the observer is a creative element in his perception of objects in nature.

Emerson affirms this non-empirical interpretation. *...few adult persons see nature. Most persons do not see the sun.* At the outset of the essay he has urged us to go into solitude by looking up at the stars, but such *looking up* is successful only if we can see those stars. Surely everyone who is not blind can see the sun too. If “most persons do not see the sun,” Emerson’s “seeing” must be qualitatively different from empirical “seeing.” Some observers will see only Miller’s or Locke’s field or Manning’s woodland; still others will integrate or bundle these perceptions as *landscape*. Seeing a landscape is the human, creative leap. While the poet sees a tree, the wood-cutter sees a stick of timber. Not everyone reaches the level of the poet or the lover of nature, just as “most persons do not see the sun.” This perception, this creative integration of impressions, is an achievement, and, if an achievement, the criterion with which to assess how well one is doing in understanding nature.

One indicator of achievement is joy: *In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.* The scene in which he describes himself standing in puddles on a bare common, at twilight, under a clouded sky would not seem especially auspicious, yet he enjoys “...a perfect exhilaration” and is “glad to the brink of fear.” The transparent eyeball passage follows, raising the joy of the lover of nature to an experience that approaches the mystical:

Standing on the bare ground—my head
bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into
infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing;
I see all; the currents of the Universal Being
circulate through me; I am part or parcel
of God. (emersoncentral,2008)

The eyeball is human perception of the world, vision, knowledge, enlightenment, and, especially, the capacity for creativity that distinguishes the human person. Only the human can see *landscape*

where only fields and woodland exist. Moreover, the human can integrate his perceptions so as to see either discrete elements, such as fields and woodland, or the holistic landscape. This eyeball, now a metaphor for human perception, must be transparent, in that "...the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me." The human is one element within the Over Soul.

Though a human being is one element within the OverSoul, human uniqueness is distinguished, within the Over Soul, by the creative perception of nature defined by his integration of impressions. Humans are distinct, not only from other dimensions of the OverSoul but also from other humans, although we have to look elsewhere in the Essays to locate his argument for individual differentiation among human persons. Human distinctiveness, thus identified in the eyeball metaphor, identifies the final goal of mankind. The human facility for the creative perception of nature provides knowledge; humans create knowledge. Humans are nature creating knowledge of itself.

There is much to reflect upon, therefore, in the transparent eyeball passage, in that his foray into Transcendentalism anticipated his view of human destiny. The essay *Nature* was followed by a large corpus of essays wherein themes of human uniqueness within the Over Soul were developed. Moreover, and especially, foundations of the quintessentially- American doctrine of self-reliance were laid here.

Reference

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/nature1.htm>. Accessed 4-25-08.