THE NATURE IN MAN;
OR, SO MANY WALKING MONSTERS

For Nature ever faithful is
To such as trust her faithfulness.
When the forest shall mislead me,
When the night and morning lie,
When sea and land refuse to feed me,
'Twill be time enough to die
-R.W. Emerson, *Woodnotes I*

Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed, – chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones…It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods…God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools, – only Uncle Sam can do that.
- John Muir, *The American Forests*

In the room in which you sit, no matter how far removed from the green wilds of the forest or the azure waters of the sea, the offerings of nature surround you. This friendly system, Earth, provides our sustenance, our life-support. Every bit of our computers and every beam of our buildings, every fiber of our clothing and every calorie on our plate has been pulled from the Earth and transformed by human hands. Yet, human recognition of this robust and essential interdependence of man and nature has been sold into the shadows during the flourishing of late-industrial-capitalism. Instead of attempting to live in sustainable coexistence with the natural world, we exploit and plunder the offerings of the Earth, parasitically depleting once fecund fields, forests, and waters in the name of perpetual progress.

Although recent environmental movements have been invaluable for raising awareness of present and future environmental and ecological problems, there is no consensus (academic, political, or otherwise) as to what the human comportment towards nature entails or how such a comportment is to be constituted. The political responses are tired and threadbare; overwhelmingly framing environmental issues in terms of their economic consequences or their impact upon national security. Such political responses dominate the conversation while failing to address the idea of nature itself. It is the human idea about the nature in man, and about how man exists in nature, which must be returned into the dialogue.

This paper explores the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson in order to unearth his
theory of nature so we may enlist it in the project of rearranging ethical conversations about the environment. Emerson’s reverence of nature, coupled with the practical action of his self-reliance, provide us with an ethically pragmatic framework from which we can begin to change our comportment towards our world. I will begin by disambiguating what exactly Emerson means by "nature." This explication will allow us to then see how an ethics inheres in his conception. Lastly, I will show that cultivating such an ethical posture towards nature demands practical action rooted in self-reliance.

I

Nature is at the root of almost all Emerson’s most famous work. Yet, initially it is unclear what exactly Emerson means by the term "nature," and, more importantly, if his conception remains applicable in this new century. In "The American Scholar," an address delivered in 1837, Emerson calls for the learned men of society to unglue themselves from the rote dictates of scholarship – in which they are "mere thinker[s], or, still worse, the parrot[s] of other men's thinking" – so they may become "Man Thinking," the creative and self-reliant individual unbound to the prescriptions of the past.¹ First on Emerson's list of influences on Man Thinking is nature:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows...The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he can never find, – so entire, so boundless.²

Emerson has a broad, inclusive view of nature. While he certainly has in mind the wild spaces we associate with the term (forests, deserts, oceans, etc.), he also understands nature as everything "not-me" – that is, art, other people, even my own body is nature in the strictest sense.³ Yet, this not-me of nature is a responsive alterity, the co-constituting other to the independent “I.” Emerson knows that man comes from nature, is part of nature, and therefore resembles nature in inextricable ways.⁴ Nature reflects the human being and

⁴ In "Self-Reliance," when intimating the divine aspects of nature, he will say that we are "receivers of its truth and organs of its activity." (Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in EEP, p. 269; my emphasis.)
“resembles his own spirit;” just as the natural world is in constant flux, perennially expanding its bounds, so too are humans defined by their expansion, their newness. In the essay "Circles" Emerson begins by stating, "Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning" and in closing reiterates that, "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit."5 The Emerson biographer Robert Richardson writes that, "[Emerson] understood nature to be a process rather than a thing"6 – that is, true to his romantic lineage, as well as to the pervasive influence of Darwin on 19th Century thought, Emerson sees the flux of the natural world as an extension of the human mind, and vice versa.

Emerson’s understanding of the mind’s relation to nature is integral for our current task. Though committed to the idea of flux, Emerson also understands that fixed laws govern nature and that, "things in nature are unified and whole, though not always in obvious ways."7 (In his essay "Nature" Emerson alludes to the holism of nature and man by stating, "Compound it how she will, star, sand, fire, water, tree, man, it is still one stuff, and betrays the same properties."8) Richardson emphasizes the inextricable link of mind and nature in Emerson, stating that,

The central point, the pivot of Emerson's understanding of nature, is his conception of the all-encompassing relationship that exists at all times between the mind – understood as a more or less constant, classifying power – and the infinite variety of external nature.9 Emerson is here indebted to Kant, by way of Schelling, for this experiential understanding of nature. Emerson is not a solipsist and he is not implying that nature exists only in the mind. Instead, he underlines the human element in our experience of nature and claims, like Kant, that the external world only makes sense to us through our faculties of understanding. We are perspectival beings and the world shows up for us only insofar as we engage with it. Thus, if we are to come into a harmonious, living relationship with nature we must experience it for ourselves, letting its beatific power convince us of our coevality. This is

7 Ibid.
8 Emerson, “Nature,” in EEP, p. 547.
9 Richardson, CCE, p. 102.
why, in "The American Scholar," Emerson claims,

[Na]ture is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess.10

Emerson embraces the empirical sciences, yet, he understands that no amount of data or replicable test results provide true insight into the wonders of the natural world. To appreciate is to experience, and to experience is to co-respond to your environment by hearing, watching, feeling. Douglas Anderson communicates this idea in his essay “Emerson’s Nature’s,” stating that nature, "is not consummated until the agency of the 'I' appears on the scene; nature's agency in part runs through us, through human endeavor."11

Nature, Emerson tells us, is not complete without man:

Nature is loved by what is best in us...The sunset is unlike anything that is underneath it: it wants men. And the beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking, until the landscape has human figures, that are as good as itself.12

II

Through Emerson’s conception of nature – specifically in the reciprocal relationship humans have to the natural world – an ethical element comes forward. However, as Anderson keenly notes, Emerson "never presents a straightforward argument concerning our obligations to nature or the environment; instead he gives the reader sufficient material to discern an outlook revealing a complex understanding of these obligations."13 Emerson, true to his beseechingly self-reliant philosophy, instead of prescribing oughts from on-high, wants us each to develop our morality out of the soil of experience. At first, this seems myopic. Why can’t be just tell us what to do? Doesn’t be realize people need their ethical paradigms prescribed, lest they fall into moral oblivion? In fact, Emerson’s point is just the opposite: morality is impotent when based in someone else's commands: in "Self-Reliance" he implores us to "Trust thyself" and warns,

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of

---

10 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in EEP, p. 56.
12 Emerson, “Nature,” in EEP, p. 545; my emphasis.
13 Anderson, NME, p. 152.

Alex Curtas – Earth Day Conference 2010 Presentation, provided to WAC Archive by permission of the author. © 2010 Alex Curtas.
The lesson of Emersonian ethics is a constantly renewing self-reflection which asks the individual to contemplate the practical outcomes of ethical positions. Today, the decisions made on behalf of the Earth are void of this experiential reflectivity; the ethical dimension of these decisions has been usurped by material concerns; the *worth* of nature to man has been replaced by the *value* of its standing reserve of resources. The freedom that global liberalism provides is largely negative – freedom *from* want, freedom *from* regulation – and harshly anthropocentric; debilitating not only to the wage-slaves of developed and developing countries, but to the complex system of the natural world. The cosmetic freedoms we enjoy underneath betray a slavish conformity to material wealth furnished by unsustainable industrial processes; and, as Emerson says, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.”

Emerson views the good society as one where each individual attains the fullness of the human form through solitary contemplation coupled with societal engagement. This relationship of individual and society is reciprocal, neither aspect functioning fully without the other. Because of Emerson’s broad view of nature this reciprocity is not merely political or material but extends to the individual human relationship with the larger Earth. Nature *qua* the unadulterated natural environment lives in harmony with itself; it is the disordered human relationship to the natural world which allows nature to be objectified. This is why, in the essay “Nature,” Emerson states, “Man is fallen; nature is erect…We see the foaming brook with compunction: if our own life flowed with the right energy, we should shame the brook,” thereby intimating how we might learn from nature to live harmoniously with our surroundings.

This Emersonian master-tone of erectness can be read ethically as imploring us to stand upright, in completeness, like forest trees, for example, which provide for their environments while taking their sustenance from the soil, living sustainably within their

---

15 Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *EEP*, p. 261. In America, for example, our material choices are so abundant that we have come to measure our freedom by how many car or cereal brands we can choose from. Yet, such a cosmetic plethora of riches belies the fact that only a handful of corporations own the majority of the products we use. Not to mention that with such ‘freedom of choice’ comes an anxiety that has been shown to diminish overall levels of well-being (C.f. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004)).
ecosystems. In “The American Scholar” Emerson even uses an arboreal metaphor to describe the unharmonious comportment of civilization: “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, – a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.”

The natural, holistic analogies Emerson draws between the life of nature and the life of man are echoed in strands of contemporary environmental ethics. The famous “land ethic” of Aldo Leopold situates Homo sapiens in a reciprocal, ethical relationship to the land:

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics...[A] land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-member, and also respect for the community as such...A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

In Leopold’s account, as well as in Emerson’s, there is aesthetic, instrumental and inherent worth in the natural world, which obligates human respect and stewardship. Emerson’s view of nature as an extension of the human – whose examples of harmony and erectness we should strive to imitate – have also been echoed in the deep ecology movement, developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970’s. Naess emphasized that humans should cultivate a relational understanding of themselves within the larger biosphere. Humans would then realize that all living things are constituted by their relations to other living things and thus would be inclined to take better care of animals, plants, and ecosystems which make civilization possible. Naess argued that the concept of Self should be expanded to include the natural environments in which humans are situated; as all independent human selves deserve respect so too must we care for our larger, ecological extension of Self.

Emerson would be highly sympathetic to these strands of environmental ethics. However, the thrust of Emerson’s nature-ethic privileges individual contemplation and personal action in ways most theories do not. Emerson’s democratic pragmatism on this point is why I believe returning to his thought on these issues is of vital importance in our

---

17 John Muir echoes this sentiment when he speaks lovingly of the majestic “up-ness” that forests and mountains so effortlessly attain. Muir admired Emerson greatly, calling Emerson “the most serene, majestic, sequoia-like soul I ever met,” after their serendipitous encounter in Yosemite in 1871. (C.f. <http://www.wisdomportal.com/Emerson/Emerson-JohnMuir.html> for a compendium of their writings to and about each other.)
18 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in EEP, p. 54; my emphasis.

Alex Curtas – Earth Day Conference 2010 Presentation, provided to WAC Archive by permission of the author. © 2010 Alex Curtas.
century.

III

Just as Emerson interprets “nature” broadly, he also interprets the concept of “the scholar” broadly. Thought stagnates when it is cooped up inside classrooms and guarded jealously in books and journals. Emerson understands that knowledge is democratic and that the only way to combat “[t]he sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude” is for everyone to become Man Thinking, to convince themselves of “the oneness or the identity of the mind through all individuals” and realize that, “[t]he main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man.” This “upbuilding” – analogous to the master-tone of erectness – is the practical effect of the dissemination of knowledge and is crucial for cultivating a proper comportment towards nature. Since what interests us here is one’s knowledge of the natural world – that is, knowledge in the sense of experience and appreciation – we must ask: How are we to bring about substantive environmental change through this knowledge? Here, Richardson reminds us that, “[n]ature is also Emerson’s practical guide to an ethical life.” For Emerson, knowledge and action are co-determining and, “morality, no less than science or art, is experimental.” Every day the empirical sciences are revealing more about the inextricable relationships between ecosystems and the beings within them. Our paradigms of action toward nature, since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, have been couched almost universally in technological terms – what Martin Heidegger calls Gestell, the reduction of all things (living and non-living) into mere resources to be optimized for human use. This anthropocentric comportment towards nature is not in any way sustainable, though the virtue it professes has infected all aspects of our society. Emerson’s pragmatic point on this issue is:

There is no virtue which is final; all are initial…The terror of reform is the discovery that we must cast away our virtues, or what we have always esteemed such, into the same pit that has consumed our grosser vices. We have experimented with the technologized anthropocentric model for long enough – it is

---

22 Richardson, CCE, p. 103. Emerson himself also reminds us that, “Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth.” (Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in EEP, p. 60.)
23 Russell Goodman, PCR, p. 22.
24 Emerson, “Circles,” in PCR, p. 31.

Alex Curtas – Earth Day Conference 2010 Presentation, provided to WAC Archive by permission of the author. © 2010 Alex Curtas.
time to shuffle loose its mortal coil, for it is quickly killing us. New conceptions of our Earthly relationships must take root in the individual; our interdependence must be recognized alongside the enslavement our way of life represents. When contemplating how the wine, coffee, tobacco and sugar found their way to his table in 1844, Emerson realized that almost every commodity he enjoyed was the direct result of slavery. This epiphany made him “heart-sick” and he professed that language “must be raked…must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been.”\textsuperscript{25} By this he meant that common words, thought only to represent benign products of a free-market economy (instead of cotton and sugar, think today of gasoline, diamonds, soybeans, cattle), in actuality, when more thoroughly investigated, betray themselves as the end result of horrifically violent and immoral processes. It is no large intellectual leap to see that contemporary standards-of-living are underwritten by a similar slavery, yet, our slave is now the Earth itself and it cannot caterwaul or cry freedom like the slaves of the past.

We, ourselves, are the fools John Muir mentions in the epigraph to this paper. Yet, we, ourselves, are also Uncle Sam. Our democracy was built upon this Earth and we contradict ourselves by our tyranny over her. But we are the only ones who can alter this course, through stern reflections on our interdependence with, and obligation to, the soil from whence we came. We must tap into what Emerson calls our “generosities of the heart”\textsuperscript{26} and each live our individual lives with reverence and respect to the world which surrounds us. Defeating policies and industries which lack all such natural appreciation are bold and necessary steps. But Emerson’s lasting lesson is a personal one, a practical one, which beseeches each of us to recognize the nature in man as the axiom of man in nature. Emerson’s thought gives us just enough direction to inaugurate our efforts but refuses to prescribe a particular course. Our age must write its own books, we must turn our theories into practical actions that will alter the present for the benefit of posterity. Emerson’s gift, more than anything else, is inspiration; hope in the possibilities of an enlightened tomorrow:

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart! – it seems to say, – there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.\textsuperscript{27}


\textit{Alex Curtas – Earth Day Conference 2010 Presentation}, provided to WAC Archive by permission of the author. © 2010 Alex Curtas.