

American Romanticism
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EMERSON AND THOREAU REVIEW

(THE EMERSON REVIEW NOTES BELOW ARE A CONDENSED VERSION OF THE PREVIOUS LONGISH EMERSON LECTURE NOTES. I EXPAND AMPLY ON THE METAPHYSICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FAMOUS "TRANSPARENT EYEBALL" PASSAGE AS IT IS, LIKELY, THE MOST FAMOUS PASSAGE IN ALL OF AMERICAN LITERATURE.... YOU WILL NOT FULLY "GET" THE REST OF THIS SEMESTER'S AUTHORS IF YOU DO NOT GRASP THE PROFOUND TRICKINESS AND SPIRITUAL/INTELLECTUAL RESONANCE OF THE PASSAGE... and thus I dwell on it, twice)

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EMERSON: "NATURE"

--An "original relation to the universe" = One of the key romantic themes (in British Romanticism also as one of you mentioned, e.g. William Blake) is to break through conventional modes of being and seeing, to see the world with fresh eyes, to disconnect from history and dogma and authority.

--The Soul (or "I") and Nature division = what is called, in philosophy, the problem of mind/body dualism; or how being without dimension (the "I") can connect with the 3-dimensional world. We are, if you think about it in existential terms, fundamentally alienated by that which extends outside of the self.

--Via the somewhat goofy eyeball passage, Emerson tries to conjoin the "I" (the subject) and Nature (the object world). He has a cosmic epiphany/revelation in which the "I" diminishes or is subsumed into or becomes the same as the external world/cosmos via the circumambient everywhere transparent eyeball. He becomes ALL seeing, being, now-ing (hard for us to fathom since we are so attached to materiality and things) without an "I" seeing or "objects" being seen. He says that "mean egotism" (what I called the narrative of your life that you hear inside your skull) vanishes in the process of being pure perception.

--Emerson seems to be literally situated in a particular field (the "commons") and has a mystic vision which he conveys thru the eyeball passage. I personally can relate to the notion of being totally absorbed in an activity, of being "in the groove" and so on, but Emerson's vision seems more ecstatic than that . . . and yet he does not angst over his presumably short-lived peak experience, as traditional mystics do. I sense that Emerson abstractly understands what a mystic epiphany might be, and longs for it, but did not REALLY experience it.

EMERSON: "THE OVER-SOUL"

"Man is a stream whose source is hidden." Behind the facade of our idiosyncratic selfhood, we have a common source in the infinite Godhead, oversoul, or cosmic being. Great men or women, Emerson suggests elsewhere, are not great because of their unique brilliance, power, or whatever, but because they have shunned their petty selves and drawn upon the power of the oversoul. Emerson, in a famous quote, says we all could be Shakespeare if we were to let go our mean egotism.

EMERSON: JOURNALS

Does the passage on having "quite other slaves to free than those negroes" seem like a good or poor excuse for political inactivity? Paper topic tip: for those interested in the research option, reading Emerson's journals more extensively on race and slavery might be interesting!!!

Reread the passage in which Emerson addresses his obligations in terms of charity. Following the logic of the "Oversoul" essay, since we all commonly share in the depth/power of the oversoul, we could all be like Shakespeare if we were to quell our trivial selves: we all have Shakespearean potentiality within, and in honoring Shakespeare we really honor the oversoul rather than Shakespeare per se. But, if we all share the oversoul, should we not honor it in each of us, even if we are feeble on the surface? In the journal entry on charity, Emerson simply seems to spurn weakness and lack of independence/autonomy in the fashion that, say, today a conservative Republican might (i.e. no welfare state). So, Emerson's metaphysics may be radical, but when we translate that metaphysics into social ideas, Emerson ends up being very conventional.

THOREAU: WALDEN

CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM/CONSUMERISM/ECONOMY

--The self becomes inauthentic in the exchanges of the capitalist market place. Social relations, to the extent that they are based on selling/buying, catering to purchasers or appeasing bosses, etc., become nauseating. So much in the world of consumerism (luxury) is not essential because it is superfluous to our true being.

--Better to live a simple, spartan, austere, ascetic life, so you can get in touch with the core authenticity (note the way Thoreau constantly juxtaposes true reality vs. mush).

WALDEN POND AND FLINT POND

--Walden pond becomes a refuge from capitalist consumerism and a symbol of autonomy. It is "continent", with no contamination, no connection beyond itself.

--Flint pond is impure, not clean, and contaminated by manure. At this point Thoreau seems to be overly obsessed with purity versus filth and waste. Psychologically, Thoreau is somewhat anal-retentive-compulsive, loathing disorder and mess, and preferring the tidiness that can only be achieved by living independently and autonomously. Thoreau offers a social critique of capitalism, but perhaps psychoanalytically, he most fears losing control, of unclean merging beyond the pristine self. His brother lost control of his appendages when he died of lockjaw, and maybe Thoreau most fears losing control of his own body? Thoreau wants a closed, continent economy, not a wasteful, excremental economy. (Interesting biographical note#1: Thoreau lost all his teeth from tooth rot. Note#2: Emerson said that his friend Thoreau was so rigid and self-contained in posture, that to shake his hand was like shaking a branch of a tree)

HIGHER LAWS

--Thus he makes the remark about loathing “this slimy, beastly life”—about giving into low, sensual cravings.

SPRING

The long (and famous) thawing sand passage: is this a heroic imaginative affirmation of life-out-of-muck/body parts or only just a metaphor? Like Walden Pond, the sandbank is invested with projected meaning. Towards the end of Walden Thoreau gets rhapsodic about spring light, animation, and so on. He dwells on joy, life, spring, etc. vs the dark, death, poison, wounds.

Just as Emerson speaks of the sublime eyeball vision that heals the rupture between self and non-self, between the ‘I’ and the external, lifeless world, Thoreau, at the end of Walden, wants to say “nothing is inorganic,” that nothing is dead/wasteful/excremental, that the entire world is invested with animation. The message is one, in essence, of the promise of resurrection (but absent Christian meaning and theology), of bringing life out of death, of joy out of depression, of purgative cleaning out of messy defilement.

The above resurrectory theme applies mostly to the self and the self’s relation to nature or the external (dead) world. But I offer, as a closing professorial gesture, Thoreau’s comment about being charitable (in the largest sense) to others. Thoreau does not typically think about the interpersonal, but I find the following quote profound (or am I just being a sentimentalist?):

"Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world, and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten."