

**"SPIRITUAL TRUTH OF NATURE" IN R.W. EMERSON'S
*SELF-RELIANCE***

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American prophet and one of the great writers of English literature, is known all over the world. Generally, however, it is seen that it is poets who are obviously inspired by Nature, but the influence of Nature upon the other genres is not so obvious, especially in non-fictional prose. This is where Emerson stands out from other essayists in literature. Nature is not a dead relic for Emerson; rather it is a source of living power, which is an unbreakable link between man and Nature, a relation that is mutually conscious and mystical. It is the power of Nature that penetrates into human life and sets a communicative link between him and the Divine. When the communion between the soul of Nature and the soul of man takes place, it becomes an unfolding expression of the Divine, because God is present in both the souls. The presence of God in Nature and in man makes possible the restoration of harmony between these two souls. In *Self-Reliance* Emerson insists that man has been endowed with all the faculties by which he can reach the highest limit of perfection. In other words, within him there are the seeds of his own growth. This development is in his own hands and he can proceed with *Self-Reliance*. He goes ahead towards his goals of perfections. All the difficulties would melt before his confidence. Self-Reliance in man represents the highest spiritual principle in him.

INTRODUCTION

The love of nature- the accord between man and the external world- what is it but the perception how truly all our senses, and beyond the senses, the soul, are tuned to the order of things in which we live.

(Emerson 187)

Nature has been a continuing subject and theme in literature from its early days. Throughout the history of human thought human beings have constantly examined their relation to it. Hence, there have been many philosophers, thinkers and writers through the ages who have

tried to interpret it in their own ways. It is so important a part of literature in every culture all over the world that no literary discussion is complete or possible without taking into account how Nature has been dealt with in creative writing. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

In the history of philosophy the term "nature" has been used in various inconsistent senses, corresponding more or less to the different attitudes which thinkers adopted towards the material part of the world in relation to the rest. With the Renaissance there came a more friendly attitude towards the material world and the term "nature" used in the all comprehensive senses of the entire universe- a senses which of course excluded the possibility of anything "supernatural".

(Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol. 16,166)

The English Romantics seek to explore reality as observed by the self and try to recapture experiences of Nature which occur both in the mind and in the senses. C.M. Bowra observes, "The Romantics are concerned with a mystery which belongs not to faith but to the imagination" (Bowra 282). Nature to them is sensuously enjoyable and at the same times a centre for moral and emotional values. According to the Romantics, Nature has the ability to arouse human emotions. They discover a similarity between aspects of Nature and human feelings. They associate Nature with a state of life unshaken by the dogma of reason.

The Romantic view consists of an interaction between the outer and the inner. Wordsworth states:

I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature.

(qtd. in Hilles 551)

This new sense of man's relationship with the external worlds and his realization of the power of insight are the essence of English Romanticism.

Nature had been dealt with by many of Emerson's predecessors, but never before had it been the object of veneration. This new idea came from a new vision of man as a being endowed with unlimited possibilities. Emerson believes in the primacy of mind over matter, and that both are connected with a Universal spirit. It is man's business to think and to discover this cosmic bond and raise himself to a level higher than his present one.

The distinction, which Emerson makes between the inner or invisible laws of Nature and the external or visible forms of Nature. Although the English Romantics, like Coleridge, recognize a similar distinction between *Natura Naturans* (Nature as a collection of active forces) and *Natura Naturata* (the finished products of Nature), yet Emerson is the first American writer who comprehends how these two aspects of Nature are interrelated.

Emerson firmly believes that there is an essential harmony between man and Nature which can be perceived though a close familiarity with its inherent principles (*Nature*). In fact, Emerson's long effort is to show that the laws and processes of Nature are a part of the individual mind as well as of external Nature (*Nature*). The most interesting aspect of Emerson's Nature is his argument that "Nature teaches man to look beyond Nature". (qtd. in Porte and Morris 101) To put it more clearly, the beauty of outward Nature leads man to inquire into the inner laws of Nature. What Emerson understands, and what American writers like Henry David, Thoreau and Walt Whitman since Emerson have been able to get from him, is the importance of the primary connection between man and Nature.

For Emerson Nature is always new; everything is inspiring in Nature; there is no repetition in it. Indeed, he is influenced by German Transcendentalists like Fichte, Hegel and Kant, but whatever impact they may have had on him he made it his own. Emerson's aesthetics is founded upon not only the raw materials drawn out of the flora and fauna of American valleys and rivers but is also transformed in such a manner that even a particle of dust of this land- waiting for its exploration- becomes sacred. It is because of this venerable vision, that Emerson exhorts creative writers to be aware of the glories of Nature spread over the hills and valleys of America and to leave aside blind imitation of European models ("*Self-Reliance*").

Emerson's approach to Nature is thus quite relevant in today's context. In fact, his emphasis on the Nature- culture relationship has also been the core of eco-critical studies. Like Emerson, eco-critics understand "Nature and culture as interwoven rather than as separate sides of a dualistic construct" (qtd. in Armbruster and Wallace4)

Nature in Emerson's "*Self-Reliance*"

Emerson's Essays of *First Series* (1814) are his most popular work and widely read work. Most of the essays of his *First Series* are related to God, man and Nature.

"Self-Reliance" is Emerson's most famous essay in the *First Series*. The "Self" of the essay is the "Soul" or conscience, which communicates directly with the "Over-Soul" or God. "Self-Reliance", therefore, believes that the individual should act according to his conscience. The very first line of the essay- "*Ne te quae aesiveris extra*" (Emerson 145)- in the first epigraph means "Do not seek yourself outside yourself". In other words, then, selfhood is an internal construct: nothing is outside, everything is inner.

Though "Self-Reliance", in fact, Emerson denies the Christian concept of Original Sin as well as the Calvinistic theory of the 'select few'. Emerson could not agree with the view that only because Adam and Eve had transgressed the command of God that the whole of humanity must pay the price. He gradually came to believe that as long as this doctrine of Original Sin persisted, there could never be any possibility of good citizens. Moreover, the doctrine of the 'select few' did not appeal to his historical sense. Jesus Christ had arrived two thousand years back; his arrival is associated with the redemption of mankind. Human beings have been on this planet since the last fifty thousand years. Therefore, it does not appeal to common sense that all of them- before Jesus paid ransom for their sins- would burn in the eternal fires of hell. The cosmic divinity is constantly transmitting its power to individuals and it is up to them to accept it and to transform it. Actually, Emerson's belief in "self- reliance" is the logical result of his doctrine of the Over-Soul. To him every individual soul is the part of the Universal Soul. Hence, to believe in one's own soul is to believe the Over-Soul.

Thus Emerson's hypothesis about Nature is based on inner experience: the individual mind in harmony with the Universal Mind making it own. As he observes in this essay, this vast storehouse of knowledge is waiting to be explore. The major characters of history and literature, like Napoleon, Moses, and Plato, utilized this power by making it their own (145). The power pulsating in a blade of grass or the trembling of the leaves in forest is not only a part of Nature, but also receives impressions from the Ultimate Reality. The greatness of human beings depends on making this power their own, to utilize it in their mental, physical, spiritual and moral qualities.

In his views regarding education and guidance though Nature, Emerson is confident enough that man can be educated and guided though the contemplation of Nature. Even the ancient singers acknowledged the role of Nature in moulding the character of man:

Cast the bantling on the rock, Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat;
Wintered with the hawk and fox, Power and speed be hands and feet.
(Emerson 145)

Emerson feels that man must surrender his will as well as intellect and act only in obedience to his soul. Hence, Self-reliance is obedience to the Over-Souls. Throughout the essay Emerson constantly contrasts his idea of the self-reliant man to the condition of that man in society who is overpowered by false religious dogmas. Hence, this consideration is beneficial both to the individual and to society.

Emerson declares that Nature, no doubt, has planted unique faculties in men; a great man is one who not only recognizes them, but also makes them his own though tremendous efforts to sharpen these faculties. Both Moses and Milton realized the truth of inner experience and the blessings of Nature that they had on this planet to concretize the vision of eternity. They learned to trust themselves only though Nature:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. (Emerson 145)

This faculty is found in all human being, but in a dormant stage; this stage can be crossed only though intense hard work. As a matter of fact, nothing is alike in Nature; even two pebbles lying on the bank of a river are not similar. This variety is also seen in human beings. Except for some unusual cases no two human faces are similar; similarly, their moral, mental and spiritual faculties are not alike. This dominance of one faculty- achieved though an intensity of labour- decides the destiny of man. This highest reach of morality, of spirituality, passing all understanding, is seen in the life of Jesus. Jesus is a concretization of the Universal Mind merging into the individual mind. (Emerson 152)

The great figures of history and literature were the most unconventional thinkers. They listened to the voice of Eternity, guided and uplifted by it to the extent that they became one:

Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought.

(Emerson 145)

Emerson feels that great men have always realised that God is seated in their hearts and expresses Himself in their actions. They are men in the real sense, for they have accepted their destiny. They act with courage and self-reliance but never afraid of anything. A self-reliant man follows fearlessly the command of his own inner self. He should learn to trust himself though contemplation of Nature.

Emerson declares that great landscape painting is always an expression of natural forces, tempting an artist to such an extent that he has no alternative except to express it. This expression may be a small part of Nature, or the greater part of Nature. But the first thing to be desired is that the expression should be natural. A work of art should establish harmony with Nature, and the first symptom of this is spontaneity:

Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humoured inflexibility, than most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side.

(Emerson 146)

Whether it is sculpture or painting, says Emerson, they are always symbols that express the relationship between the finite and infinite to the extent of obliterating the difference between the two. The harmony is always there; what the artist has to do is to make it his own. Memory plays its part, too, but it is not enough unless the harmony is established. Through the faculty of imagination, the various parts are then merged into a whole. The influence of German philosophy, passing through Coleridge, is evident here. The rays of light falling on blooming flowers and all the other aspects of Nature alone do not make a work of art. It happens only when the knower and the known become one:

This sculpture in the memory is not without pre-established harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of the particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents.

(Emerson 146)

Emerson says that all men are unique, in the sense that Nature has blended various talents in them. But the majority of people are ignorant about his. They have gone far away from Nature. They have forgotten that Nature has made them in a different way. Hence, they must make the best of that portion of life that has been assigned to them. The vigour of Nature does not work in isolation; it must have a medium. Genius is a profound expression of the unique force of Nature working through man:

The power which resides in him is new in nature and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing, one face, one character, one fact, makes much impression on him, and another none.

(Emerson 146)

Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" is based on his doctrine of "Trust thyself" (146). He was an individualist; he thought that a good society would be a society composed of good individuals. He believes that a man become self-reliant only when he rejects the false authority that governs man. The whole spirit of this essay suggests how a loftier vision of eternity can be attained by cultivating life as an art. The essay also tells the reader that the life divine is not something to be attained in the next world- as implied by the conventional concept of Christianity- but is a possibility, here.

Emerson suggests man to contemplate in Nature for the upliftment of his soul. The beauty of Nature suggests to man's intellect and also to man's will and sentiment. It is therefore in the very beginning of the address Emerson invites his listeners to experience Nature:

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of lowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay.

(Emerson 67)

Emerson relies upon the beautiful sights of Nature that leads man to understand further knowledge, a knowledge that is not attainable by means of sensory experience. Man has faculties which transcend the senses:

When the mind opens and reveals the laws which traverse the universe and make things what they are, then shrinks the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of his mind.

(Emerson 67)

So, from the contemplation of Nature, man's insight perceives the laws of the soul. While all men have soul, the vision of spirituality comes to them by intuition. Hence, there is no need of outside instruction to realize the laws of the soul. Emerson's notion about the "fall of man" can be explained by the absence of this self-reliance, and his ideas about the degradation of the church spring from the sense that the faith in soul is absent. Emerson announces the force that shows God in man is none but, Nature. He closes the essay with the following statement:

A political victory, a rise of recents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable events, rise your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but your self. Nothing can bring your peace but the triumph of principles.

(Emerson 151)

Conclusion

It is obvious by now that Nature plays a pivotal role in the essays of Emerson. Nature, indeed, is a living reality for him; it vibrates constantly with an eternal melody; Nature vibrates through the songs of birds, the trembling of leaves through forest, and the roaring sound of waterfalls. The glories of the sunshine, the radiant colours of the rainbow, and the vision of the horizon, where the sky and the earth meet each other, are as much part of Nature as is the soul of man. The cyclic succession of the seasons makes everything anew; nothing is old or still in Nature it is dynamic.

In "Self-Reliance" Emerson insists that man has been endowed with all the faculties by which he can reach the highest limit of perfection. In other words, within him there are the seeds of his own growth. His development is in his own hands and he can proceed with self-reliance. He goes ahead towards his goal of perfection. All the difficulties would melt before his confidence. Self-reliance in man represents the highest spiritual principle in him. Emerson boldly asserts that "if a man is a product of Nature, then whatever he thinks or does in the world is a product of Nature". (qtd. Porte and Morris 43) This complete and comprehensive connection between Nature and mind is the fundamental aspect of the essays of Emerson.

Like the English Romantics, Emerson stresses the role of the self in any worthwhile emotional experience. However, he wants to discover a stable centre of truth in the correspondence between the self and the physical world ("Self-Reliance"). He believes that the greatest deterrent for the development of personality and in the field of creative activity is imitation ("Self-Reliance"). He also believes that man must abandon himself to work in harmony with the unseen powers governing the visible world. By surrendering his will and intellect, to achieve mutual relationship with the Universal Spirit, man could become a vehicle of the Divine Spirit.

In short, Emerson's approach to Nature is multi-faceted. It is metaphysical and mysterious, yet at the same time it is scientific too. It is not only poetic, aesthetic and romantic but also realistic, From this point of view Ralph Waldo Emerson is in a position of superiority when compared with other writers in English. His epitaph may thus be summed up in his own words:

Good-bye, proud would! I'm going home:
I am going to my own hearth-stone,
Bosomed in yon green hills alone.
And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
Where the evening start to holy shines,

I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan;
For what are they all, in their high conceit,
When man in the bush with God may meet?

(qtd. in Foerster 43)

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