

Emerson and whitman: nature as a divine teacher



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For Emerson and Whitman, nature is more than just the trees that line the street, or even the flowers that rest beautifully within the vase. Both men find such a deeper harmony and value within nature, in a way that is very relevant to the transcendental theories each of them express. In Ralph Waldo Emerson's, "Nature" and "Self-Reliance" and Walt Whitman's, "Song of Myself" nature can even be considered in a spiritual light. Both men understand nature as a teacher who, when understood through the right perspective, can illuminate the divine order of life and qualities of the individual self.

Emerson finds an essential knowledge in nature; in many ways nature is a tool to truly understand life: "All Science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature" (215). Emerson is suggesting here that nature holds an ultimate truth. He explains, "We have theories of races and of function, but scarcely yet a remote approximation to an idea of creation" (215). With all the things that science has been able to explain, we still do not have an explanation for the essence of the creation of life. Nature is the ultimate example of life itself and to learn from nature one can unlock the truth about life's great questions. Emerson understands this and asks, "Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs? (214). Similarly, as Whitman observes an oxen relaxing in the shade he wonders, "what is/ that you express in your eyes?/ It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life" (1338). Both Emerson and Whitman support the idea of learning for one's self, and the best way to do so is not to mimic others of the past but to tap into new thoughts of today unfolding in the very nature around us.

Emerson stresses, "Man is timid and apologetic...He dares not say 'I think,' I am,' but quotes some saint or sage" (278). Critical of this, Emerson uses nature to show that this is not the way people should think in order to properly participate and progress in life. He explains, "These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day" (278). Likewise, Whitman stresses to "possess the good of the earth and sun" (32) and "no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through/ the eyes of the dead" (34-35). Both men ultimately feel that it is vital for humans to connect with the divine order of the universe found in nature in order to understand their own place in nature and the essential knowledge of life itself. Emerson stresses, "He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time" (278).

A true connection with nature is related to how one perceives, for one can only understand the divine order of nature if one can observe and participate in nature with an unbiased perspective. Emerson says, "few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing" (216). Emerson is suggesting that most people's perspectives are convoluted with preconceived ideas and notions about the world around them. In order to learn from nature one has to be open to experiencing nature in a way that can reflect one's own intuition. Emerson offers the metaphor, "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child" (216). A child has "Retained the spirit of infancy" and does not rely on what he already knows but trusts his own self and explores nature with genuine curiosity and wonder in a way

that he can truly understand what nature has to offer. Similarly, when Whitman relates to the child's question, "What is the grass?" (98) he does not attempt an answer, but rather admits, "I do not know what it is any more than/ he" (99-100). Whitman is suggesting his ability to see nature through the heart like the child does. He allows himself to ponder the question and is most definitely exploring for himself, rather than subscribing to what he has already been told. He knows that his own wonders and ideas have meaning and validity. However nonsensical they seem at first, such as when he considers the grass as, "the beautiful uncut hair of graves," (110) they ultimately lead him to meaningful revelations about life and death. Whitman eventually comes to the realization that, "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death" (126,) and comes to find "to die is different from what any one supposed" (130).

When approached with the right perspective, nature is not only a teacher of the world around us, but as humans are a part of nature, nature can also teach about the self. Emerson uses nature to relate to the transcendental concept of self-reliance. He suggests, "The poise of the planet, the bending tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital recourses of every vegetable and animal, are also demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" (279). Through observing the order of nature, Emerson understands that just as nature operates in a self-relying manner, humans as part of nature are also best operating in a similar fashion. Whitman similarly observes nature and notices, "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and/ self-contain'd" (684-684). In his observation of the way animals in nature are "self-contain'd" he relates, "

They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their/ possession" (693-693). Whitman is able to see himself in nature, and in his observation of the animals he learns that like the animals, he too would be best self reliant without the worry of possessions, duty to god, or external conditions.

While Emerson and Whitman understand that most people in society are filled with materialistic concerns and live in a way that is reliant on thoughts fed from others and the past, they believe that this is not the true way to live. Both find a very harmonious relationship with nature and emphasize nature as it relates to the transcendental elements of critical thinking and self-reliance. When one assumes the unbiased perspective similar to that of a child and immerses themselves in the nature of the very world unfolding around them, they can discover a greater truth about both the divine order of both existence and the self.

Work Cited

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