Nature and the Logic of Emerson’s Man-Making

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Ralph Waldo Emerson’s politics has received much scholarly attention in recent years. For example, his political involvements, such as those relating to his position on abolitionism and the women’s rights movement, have begun to be both recognized and documented after long neglect, and studies on this dimension of the “Sage of Concord” have progressed. In this vein, Larry J. Reynolds, situating him alongside Nathaniel Hawthorne and other contemporary writers, has pointed out Emerson’s comparatively strong racism and “Negrophobia” despite his participation in antislavery (92). Meanwhile, the authors of A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011) have attempted to confirm “Emerson’s adamant liberal vision of universal moral and political rights” (Levine and Malachuk 31). Although they have presented different views on Emerson and politics, they have certainly shed new light on the author and his writings.

In this essay, I would like to explore the political implications of Emerson’s Nature (1836). Nature is one of Emerson’s most representative and philosophical works. In this work, he traces the process by which a human mind becomes independent from the “fathers.” This attempt by Emerson may appear feminist because of his resistance to the fathers’ authority: Christina Zwarg, for instance, states,
“because of Emerson’s active hostility toward authority, he often celebrated a feminine subversion in his work” (33). It must be underscored, however, that the resistance against patriarchal authority is not necessarily feminist in its implication; rather, it may perform a political function that fosters a new sort of authority. In order to reconsider Emerson’s anti-patriarchal discourse, it is useful to introduce Jay Fliegelman’s theory regarding “the American revolution against patriarchal authority” (5). According to Fliegelman, America’s revolution against Britain was achieved through two processes: first, following the new pedagogy presented by Locke, Rousseau, and Scottish Common Sense philosophers that valued nurture higher than nature, America rejected filial obedience to the oppressive father Britain and set the ideal of the benevolent nurturing father who accepts his child as his equal; second, America required such benevolence from Britain as well as aligned itself with its ideal. Thus the revolution was at once the resistance to the old patriarchy and the creation of the new. As a text written in the context of America’s nationalism after the American Revolution, Nature seems to have a similar logic at work: it at once denounces fathers and creates new men. The following discussion is an attempt to demonstrate the logic of Emerson’s man-making.

Emerson begins Nature by addressing his readers as follows in the introduction of the essay:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? 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? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields.
There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (27)

Emerson’s claim for independence from the “fathers” and for “our own works and laws and worship” corresponds to what he was experiencing at this period in his life: he was leaving the world of the “fathers.” He resigned from the Second Church in Boston in 1832, at which he had worked as the junior pastor since 1829. Such an arena had long been the world of his father and forefathers: “Emerson’s paternal forebears,” Donald Yannella notes, “had occupied the pulpit of the Congregational Church in Concord, Massachusetts, for all but thirty-two years since 1635, and these several decades included the ministry of his step-grandfather” (1). His father, William Emerson, was the minister of the First Church in Boston, where “he played an active role in public affairs” (Richardson 20). For Emerson, the ministry was literally the world of the “fathers.”

Emerson’s forefathers were mostly “orthodox clergymen,” that is, the Puritan Fathers and their descendants. His father William was a Unitarian but “[n]ever a Unitarian radical”: he was “a genteel and manncred man,” Yannella concisely explains, “who was drawn to the security of established prosperity and, in keeping with his conservative Federalist politics, distrusted the threat of excessive democratization” (2). While William died in 1811 when Emerson was eight years old and, according to Robert D. Richardson Jr., was “an indistinct and minor figure in his son’s life” (20), he nonetheless remained in the son’s memory as the strict father. Although somewhat contradictory to his own account of William, Richardson introduces Emerson’s anecdote of his father: William “put me in mortal terror by forcing me into the salt water off some wharf or bathing house”; more than forty years later, Emerson could “still recall the fright with which, after some of this salt experience, I heard his voice one day (as Adam that of the Lord God in the garden) summoning us to a new bath, and I vainly endeavoring to hide myself” (20). In Emerson’s memory, William is associated with the angry God of the Old Testament from whose power he “vainly” tries to escape. When Emerson, having left the world of the ministry, calls for “a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs” as written in the above passage in Nature, it is not improbable that he had in his mind his “fathers” who had accepted and enjoyed their pubic
roles as ministers for generations—and among them especially William, who left
him a gripping memory of absolute power over him as well as a history of his writ-
ing, *Historical Sketch of the First Church in Boston* (1812).

This world of the “fathers,” however, was in the process of “feminization” accord-
ing to Ann Douglas. As a result of the “disestablishment”—churches’ loss of gov-
ernmental support—that occurred along with the American Revolution and was
complete by 1833, ministers, as well as women, were marginalized in the course of
democratization and industrialization of America in the antebellum period.³ Min-
isters’ “tangible ‘power’” was replaced by the “invisible ‘influence’” that they had
come to share with women; additionally, their “authority”—if any—was limited
“only within their largely domestic and personal ‘spheres’” (41, 43). In contrast,
those who gained power were self-made men of the commercial world. Accord-
ing to Michael S. Kimmel, a self-made man—a type of American manhood which
became normative along with the Revolution—is “[m]obile, competitive, aggres-
sive in business” and “derives identity entirely from [his] activities in the public
sphere” (13). Douglas introduces Harriet Martineau’s observation that ministers
were regarded by “the commercial classes” as “people halfway between men and
women” (43): some queer existences that breached the boundary between the
male public sphere and the female domestic sphere. Such a fate of ministers did
not belong to the age of William, who died at the early stage of the disestablish-
ment; but it belonged to that of Emerson. When he writes in his journal in 1834,
“I wish to be a true & free man, & therefore would not be a woman, or a king, or
a clergyman, each of which classes in the present order of things is a slave,” his
categorizing of the female, the aristocrat, and the minister as opposed to “a true
& free man” is revealing: it suggests not only his awareness of this feminizing
phenomenon in his democratizing society but also his anxiety about the masculin-
ity that his recently-resigned job had come to call into question (*Journals* 125-26).

A similar fate attended male writers of the day. David Leverenz argues that writ-
ers of the American Renaissance “felt self-consciously deviant from prevailing
norms of manly behavior”; Emerson, as well as Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau,
and Whitman, found “their most original voices in responding to the pressures
and conflicts of American manhood” (3).⁴ Writing of the work done at home natu-
really entailed the trespassing of the boundary between the spheres. In addition,
the world around literature was largely female at this time: the major part of the readers as well as the popular writers consisted of middle-class women who could afford to have education as well as to spend time and money on reading. It is not surprising if these male writers felt uncertain about their masculinity.

What is striking instead is the difference between the image of the writer having trouble with his masculinity and that of the author in the patriarchal literary tradition presented by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Guber. "In patriarchal Western culture," Gilbert and Guber state, "the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis" (6). Undoubtedly Emerson belonged to this culture; however, such an image of the author was not automatically true in terms of his self-recognition. "Give me initiative, spermatic, prophesying man-making words," Emerson writes in his journal (Journals 271). This passage illuminates his craving for the masculine "generative power" of the pen as the penis—the power that enables him at once to give birth to a man and to make himself a man—which, as the invocation itself reveals, he is unable to locate in himself. It may be this potential of writing for creating a new man that urged Emerson from the ministry to writing.

Read in this context, the passage from Nature quoted at the beginning of this section exemplifies Emerson's attempt to exercise such man-making power. Calling for independence from the "fathers," Emerson creates complicity between the "fathers" and those people of "[o]ur age" who "[b]uild the sepulchres of the fathers"; the former are connected to his ministerial "fathers," while the latter suggest normative men of the commercial world in his time. He transcends both of these oppressive figures by creating "new men" who "enjoy an original relation to the universe" and becomes such a man by himself. How then can this be achieved? The next section will look more closely at the process of Emerson's man-making.

The "transparent eye-ball" passage in the chapter "Nature" is, as the title properly shows, the epitome of Nature. It depicts the moment in which a human mind achieves "an original relation to the universe" as an epiphany, and the rest of the essay is, so to speak, a rich explanatory supplement to it. Though it is rather a
long passage, it is nonetheless necessary to attend to it closely in relation to the other parts of the essay because it illuminates the essentials of Emerson's logic of man-making.

Let us begin by looking at the passage that precedes and introduces the "transparent eye-ball" passage:

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. 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, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. (28-29)

By way of discussing what he means by nature, Emerson first creates two dichotomies here: the one between "the wood-cutter" and "the poet," and the other between "the adult" and "the child." As the first pair is replaced by the second one, the two overlap in that the former in each pair (the wood-cutter, the adult) lacks the ability to "see nature," while the latter in each (the poet, the child) enjoys it. It is not difficult to see that this dichotomy between the adult/wood-cutter and the child/poet corresponds to the one observed in the previous section: the dichotomy between men working in the commercial world and male writers—those who were regarded as normative male and those who were not in Emerson's time. Here again, the complicity between the fathers and the contemporary workers is
implied in the connection between the adult and the wood-cutter. Meanwhile, the
title deviation from the normative manhood is represented as the child and
described positively in terms of his love of nature: “[t]he lover of nature” is a man
“who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.” Emerson
later asserts: “[t]he high and divine beauty which can be loved without effem-
nacy, is that which is found in combination with the human will” (32). By setting
the human will as the opposite of “effeminacy,” he is engaging in the creation of a
new ideal of man with his power of the will. This is evident in the comparison be-
tween the wood-cutter and the poet. The wood-cutter owns farms with materiality,
whereas the poet—so Emerson’s account proceeds—owns “the landscape,” that
is, “a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate
all the parts.” Appropriating the working man’s language of ownership, Emerson
redefines the landscape created by the poet’s eye, or his will, as “the best part of
these men’s farms.” By so doing, he undermines the material value and, as he
states later, makes “the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise” “sec-
ondary desires” (36). He reverses the hierarchical dichotomy between the wood-
cutter and the poet: the poet “whose eye can integrate all the parts”—who has the
will to “see all”—is now situated higher than the wood-cutter.

The poet’s eye, or his will, is, therefore, crucial for the transformation delineated
in the “transparent eye-ball” passage:

In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of
real sorrows. Nature says,—he is my creature, and maugre all his imperti-
nent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but
every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change
corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless
noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic
or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue.
Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky,
without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have
enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too,
a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever
of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these planta-
tions of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. 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 eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (29)

There are such objects of nature as "snow puddles," "a clouded sky," and "the woods," which are outside of "I"; however, once he is in nature, he becomes a child and gains the will to "see all," and then can be united with nature and God. He becomes "a transparent eye-ball"; he is "nothing" and "part or particle of God." What is interesting to note here is that this passage is strangely replete with the language of emotions that are contradictory to each other: joy and fear, delight and sorrows, which culminates in the sentence, "I am glad to the brink of fear." In order to consider the relation between this sentence and the transformation described in the passage, Leo Bersani’s psychoanalytic theory of sadomasochism affords some insight. What connects Emerson’s passage and Bersani’s theory is the potential for narrative creation. Bersani considers "the self-shattering mechanism of masochistic jouissance" from his reconsideration of Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and finds "[s]adomasochistic practice is undoubtedly the narrativizing of a masochism" (41). He considers that masochism—sadism toward oneself—"serves life" (39), because it enables the subject to survive the gap between the childhood and the adulthood, the gap between the period of shattering stimuli and the development of ego structures capable of binding those stimuli. It is carried out by the productive replications of sexual fantasy, which Bersani
calls sublimation, and he connects it to aesthetic sublimation in his reading of Mallarmé's "L'Après-midi d'un faune." Emerson's sentence, "I am glad to the brink of fear," may be read as the moment of jouissance, which spurs Emerson from the self-loss of "I am nothing" to the sublimation in the unity with God, "I am part or particle of God."

Emerson's idea of power of the will is fully expressed in the following passage from the chapter "Discipline":

The exercise of the Will or the lesson of power is taught in every event. From the child's successive possession of his several senses up to the hour when he saith, "Thy will be done!" he is learning the secret, that he can reduce under his will, not only particular events, but great classes, nay the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives them wing as angels of persuasion and command. One after another, his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will,—the double of the man. (40-41)

This passage shows two characteristics of Emerson's logic. First, the figure of the poet oscillates between that of the child and the man in this passage as well as in the rest of the essay including the "transparent eye-ball" passage. "In the woods"—as well as among other natural objects, Emerson states in the "transparent eye-ball" passage—"a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child." Yet as the above "Discipline" passage shows, the child learns through the discipline of nature that he can "conform all facts to his character": thus, "[O]ne after another, his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things." What he finds at the end of this learning process is not only the world as "the double of the man" but himself as "the man." It unfolds the narrative of the poet who attains manhood through his power of the will. By this power, he achieves freedom and independence: once he exercises his will in
nature, he becomes a child "at what period soever of life"; he can enact his narrative of becoming a man over and over again regardless of his real situation in society. Therefore, as Emerson states in the "transparent eye-ball" passage, "to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance"; in short, human relations that imprison the poet in his role to others must be cast away. Or, to put it conversely, the power of the will that enables the poet to achieve freedom and independence must be sought in order for him to transcend such oppressive relations. In this will, the boundary that defines each one of the objects is dissolved, and through that process it is transcended. There arises a further potential of the poet: "[h]e unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew" (45). To dispose the world around the axis of his thought means to re-create the world anew with himself in the center of it. Thus the poet becomes a creator by himself: "[o]nce inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite" (50). Having left the material world of the earthly fathers, he is finally united with God—"the FATHER" (36)—by his power of the will.

Secondly, the above passage exposes the glaring impulse of the human will toward colonization and domination: it brings "all things" under its "dominion" and subjects them to it. With regard to the meaning of power for Emerson, David Leverenz states: "[f]or him power means an inward experience of spontaneous metamorphosis, not a public rivalry for dominance" (44). It is true that Emerson redefines power and asserts it to be less important than the power of man's will ("the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise" are "secondary desires" as mentioned previously); but this will-power nonetheless exhibits the will to domination. As the passage preceding the "transparent eye-ball" passage has clarified, Emerson subtly undermines the fathers together with contemporary men of the commercial world, setting the poet as their superior; the hierarchical dichotomy between them is not subverted but merely reversed. A rivalry of dominance is privately at work in Emerson's mind. It reveals the same inclination characteristic of patriarchy.

As is obvious from the above quotations, the human will is none other than the male will in Nature. Only once is the female gender mentioned: "In fact, the eye,—
the mind,—is always accompanied by these forms, male and female” (43); but it is quickly contained in male gender in the course of Emerson’s discussion about the unity in variety. It is also evident in the following passage from the chapter “Idealism”:

A noble doubt perpetually suggests itself, whether this end be not the Final Cause of the Universe; and whether nature outwardly exists. It is a sufficient account of that Appearance we call the World, that God will teach a human mind, and so makes it the receiver of a certain number of congruent sensations, which we call sun and moon, man and woman, house and trade. In my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses, to know whether the impressions they make on me correspond with outlying objects, what difference does it make, whether Orion is up there in heaven, or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul? The relations of parts and the end of the whole remaining the same, what is the difference, whether land and sea interact, and worlds revolve and intermingle without number or end,—deep yawning under deep, and galaxy balancing galaxy, throughout absolute space,—or, whether, without relations of time and space, the same appearances are inscribed in the constant faith of man? Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me. Be it what it may, it is ideal to me, so long as I cannot try the accuracy of my senses. (43)

Differences between “sun and moon, man and woman, house and trade” become “congruent sensations” to “a human mind”; those differences—even the difference between the sexes—are, so to speak, presented just in order to be reduced to this sameness. The “receiver” of the sensations who aligns all things to the congruent status in his mind is Emerson himself. “In my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses,” Emerson declares, there is no difference whether nature outwardly exists or not; “it is ideal to me.” Such skepticism about sense knowledge is, according to Jay Fliegelman, prevalent on the eve of the American Revolution due to the influence of John Locke’s theory: “as Locke’s theory of mind suggested, our ideas were ‘unreal representations of unknowable
objects' and we were adrift in a world of appearances" (15). While this skepticism helped destabilize the rigid relations among things and therefore facilitated America to free itself from the dominance of its "father" Britain, it also brought about anxiety: "[f]or as easily as the mind might be formed and guided, so might it be misinformed and misguided" (15). This is why Locke regarded education as highly important. Although Emerson shares the same discourse of revolution, there is no anxiety about being "misguided" expressed in the above passage from "Idealism." "The relations of parts and the end of the whole [remain] the same" to Emerson, regardless of whether his sense knowledge corresponds to the outside reality or not. His "impotence" is all the more beneficial because he can freely bridge the gap between reality and his ideal on the basis of his "constant faith."

In this logic, what is the most private is directly connected to what is the most public: "[w]hatever private purpose is answered by any member or part, this is its public and universal function, and is never omitted" (41). It shows a similarity to what Elizabeth Barnes regards as the danger of sympathy: Barnes, through her reconsideration of Adam Smith's theory of sympathy as the model of American democracy, points out that it conflates the public and the private through the imagination—through the projection of the self onto the other—which results in the elimination of differences. In Emerson's case, sympathy is felt in his relation to nature, and then to God, characteristically not to other people: "In a cabinet of natural history, we become sensible of a certain occult recognition and sympathy in regard to the most unwieldly and eccentric forms of beast, fish, and insect" (51). Still, it shares the elimination of differences with Barnes's scheme of sympathy. As Emerson insists in his essay, differences between things are reduced to the sameness under the male mind.

The world created in Nature is a homogeneous world filled with the replication of the self. In such a world, "[s]o fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen" (55). So too will nature with its total otherness that threw young Emerson into "mortal terror" when his father forced him into the sea; and the same could be said of the fathers, contemporary men of the world, and women who might appear to question his masculinity in reality. There is "no disgrace, no calamity" as Emerson states in the "transparent eye-ball" passage, because he only
“beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.”

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Emerson’s man-making is, thus, achieved by the poet’s power of the will to reject the influence of earthly fathers by uniting himself with the Creator—“the FATHER”—and making “himself the creator in the finite.” It consists of his mental working to reverse the hierarchical dichotomy between the adult/wood-cutter and the child/poet, and then to align all things in the world under his will by obliterating the differences among them. It enacts the narrative of a child who, through his power of the will to identify himself with the Creator, achieves the state of manhood in an instant. Thus, he sets himself as the new ideal of man with will-power.

It is striking to note, however, that Emerson was himself becoming a father at this time: his first son, Waldo, was born a month after the publication of *Nature*. Rather than seeking paternal authority among real human relations, Emerson tries to leave such a world of the fathers through his will-power. In this way he attempts to create his imagined community of independence and freedom with “the FATHER,” although such logic nonetheless exhibits its own patriarchal inclination.

Notes

1 For the background of this new critical trend, see Levine and Malachuk, “Introduction” 1-39. For its practices, see, for example, discussions by Gary Collison and Armida Gilbert.

2 See Fliegelman.

3 See Douglas, “Clerical Disestablishment” 17-43. Douglas considers Congregationalism’s loss of state support in Massachusetts in 1833 as the event that marks the completion of the “disestablishment” in the United States (23).

4 My opinion about the male writers’ position in the American society of the antebellum period and my reading of *Nature* have some parallels with Leverenz’s argument, especially as articulated in chapter 2, “The Politics of Emerson’s Man-Making Words” 42-71. However, rather than focusing on the connection among
Emerson's works including his later essay "Experience" (1844) as Leverenz does, here in my essay, I focus on *Nature* and attempt to foreground the inter-relation among the events specific to this period of Emerson's life: his departure from the ministry to writing, his publication of *Nature*, and the feminization of the ministry. As I will discuss later, my opinion about the meaning of power for Emerson is different from Leverenz's.

5 See Douglas, "Feminine Disestablishment" 44-79. It is important to note, however, that female writers often exhibit their anxieties about publicity, which result from their need to trespass the same boundary, but in the opposite direction of their male counterparts. My use of the word "trespass" is intended to suggest the regulative power of gender norms.

6 See Bersani.

7 See Barnes, especially chapter 1, "The Politics of Sympathy" 1-18.

**Works Cited**


