Pace University

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*

Emily Wolfrum

ENV 130

Professor Angelo Spillo

April 25, 2013

Emily Wolfrum

Professor Angelo Spillo

ENV 130

25 April 2013

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, by many accounts, was not a “naturalist.” Emerson never published extensive anthologies on his observations of birds, nor did he advocate the protection of natural lands or species. Though a native of Massachusetts, Emerson would never sit in wonder at Thoreau’s Walden Pond, instead fleeing the state at his earliest opportunity for the warmer shores of St. Augustine, Florida. His works were primarily focused on the self, philosophical exposés, challenging individuals to reach a greater consciousness of the present and emphasizing personal experience rather than antiquities. Such was the basis of Emerson’s self-propelled movement of Transcendentalism, a spiritual belief in the inherent virtue of man. Emerson’s 1836 masterpiece *Nature* is critically renowned as the propellant of this time-superseding philosophy. In placing the natural world—the environment—at the forefront of this philosophy, Emerson spoke volumes of its importance in shaping human life. This acclamation by the essayist may not have been the literal equivalent to his naturalist counterparts, but his more abstract concepts regarding earth and its significance certainly served a similar, if not more transcendent, objective.

Like its author, *Nature* is not an ordinary piece of naturalist literature. The book itself is broken up into five chapters, each dedicated to a philosophical concept (Nature, Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline) which is then tied back to the overarching theme of individuals having a personal relationship with the world around them. Emerson conveys this idea from the very beginning, discussing the tendency for people of the time to rely merely on prerecorded accounts of nature to make judgments.

“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? …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.” (Emerson)

Here, Emerson is mostly likely referring to very prominent eras of thought such as the Enlightenment which took place only a century prior. During this time, great thinkers such as John Locke, Voltaire, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were each proposing their own philosophical ideas regarding the universe and its social order, all of which are still studied and highly regarded in present day. However, despite this prominence and respect, Emerson deeply believes that their theories are not to be trusted, or, at least, to be considered foundational in a human’s experience with nature. Similar ideas can be found within works such as Henry David Thoreau’s *Solitude* and Rachel Carson’s “First Light,” though this message is often counterintuitive. Ironically, these exact works, which boast the urgency in not relying on text and history to develop a relationship, are each striving to become prominent in their own way, so as to be read and studied by the masses. Regardless, a common thread remains. Though Carson and Thoreau speak more from experience and from deep-rooted devoutness to nature, Emerson’s abstract and more philosophical approach to this naturalist idea of individual growth and experience with nature equally resonates.

Other naturalistic themes can also be found within *Nature*, most notably Emerson’s emphasis on the role of a child in experiencing nature and definition of a lover of nature. Derived directly from the first chapter of the book, appropriately entitled “Nature,” Emerson primarily focuses on human experience with nature. While his later ideas stray from common naturalist ideas, this more literal chapter clearly features elements which are prominent in various other naturalist works. Emerson says, “Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.” Much like Rachel Carson’s “First Light,” Emerson here describes the innocence and simplicity of appreciating nature, whether at a young age or as an adult. He further says, “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.” While many logical questions regarding nature—its existence and creation—persist, questions demanding of higher learning and understanding and complex thought, Emerson argues that having an emotional relationship with nature is something not for the intellectuals, but rather for those willing to return to a carefree and wide-eyed child’s world, where each beautiful detail can be appreciated and glorified rather than interrogated.

Emerson goes on to lengthily define a “lover of nature.” His explanation is reminiscent of the young girl in Richard Louv’s “A Walk in the Woods: Right or Privilege,” who certainly would have earned the “nature lover” title. Emerson describes the emotional and psychological state of a “nature lover,” stating that “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 impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.” Just as many naturalist writers found comfort in nature, Emerson describes this phenomenon from a philosophical standpoint, personifying nature as a maternal and caring being, who cradles her human children in warmth and love. However, Emerson describes this warmth as something which is not merely the doing of mother nature herself, but rather a “harmony of both” nature and man. In this sense, Emerson would probably place man and nature on equal playing fields, once again corresponding with his transcendentalist theories. This hierarchical placement is perhaps most adverse to naturalist ideas, as such writers would often regard nature to be above man, as displayed through symbolism in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.”

Though Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideals did not always match those of a commonly referred naturalist, his means and ends contained many similarities. While *Nature* single-handedly skyrocketed the Transcendentalist school of thought (one not even entirely based in the belief of nature, but of the capabilities of man), its author’s decision to prompt the future of individual-based learning on his relationship with nature was groundbreaking. To suggest that one could reach a more profound understanding of themselves and the outside world from walking in the woods that from reading Voltaire was a concept unheard of, and provoked thought within generations of people, who thought they could achieve everything from their books. Part of *Nature*’s success and what sets it apart from nearly all other studied naturalist works is the target audience. *Nature* challenges the intellectuals, people well-versed in their readings and who are too busy analyzing and contemplating to truly love the outdoors. Its philosophical ideas made it a more substantial and desirable read for people whose thoughts were strictly based in reason and logic, rather than raw emotion, something which cannot be taught, but rather must be felt.

*Nature* appeals to the intellectual; its fluid language and imagery and references to scholarly instances begs a mind willing to interpret and wonder. Once the work is interpreted, however, its message calls for an abandonment of such a mindset, a relinquishing of all inhibitions and distracting thoughts and theories. The beauty of Emerson’s work is that it was designed for the exact demographic he frowns upon—calling for immediate change in not only the way that we view and treat the environment around us, but also how humans come to understand themselves.

Works Cited

Emerson, Ralph W. *Nature*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Oregon State College*. Web. 22 Apr. 2013.

<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/emerson/nature-emerson-a.html#Chapter I>.

"Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Online Literature*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2013.

"Transcendentalism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 2011. Web. 24

Apr. 2013.