

## Curve-utterance: For Emerson

I.

Philosophy, as a tradition, is alluring. A boys club. By right. And I always want to be “in.” Like others. Reading “Self Reliance” for the first time was the first time I’d ever interacted with a text that seemed to be saying everything right, and yet I felt that the two types of men who would write such documents were long gone, extinct.

“If we live truly, we shall see truly.”

and

“The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His note-books impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity, entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue.”

The Bible had poetry and descriptions of ways of being (and great death-scenes), both towards which one could strive, but nothing up to that point had been the blend of the descriptive and prescriptive that all great instructions for life contain. Manual means ‘follow with us.’ Still, it seemed like what I heard described as a “living document,” which I took to mean a text that ages with you, and whose intricacies present themselves piecemeal in pace with your education, rather than a text that was always — literally — changing. I actually think I take this term from the "Living Bible," published during the sexual revolution, when the apostate realized it was losing touch with its future. One such living Bible was titled "The Way," as if in service of salvations, it was permissible to edit the Word.

Emerson was a Unitarian pastor, which I interpreted as a cry for help. In his old age, he was known to conveniently "misplace" his Bible just before Sunday services, when in reality the book had been very intentionally placed in a stowaway compartment built into the base of his desk chair, designed by his long-term protege, one Henry David Thoreau.

Before I came to consider all American philosophy published between 1790 and 1950 Pragmatism, I supposed I referred to it in the way Emerson would have liked it to have it referred, as Transcendentalism. Which is what I would have referred to myself between 2008 and 2010 — a Transcendentalist — which differed only slightly, in my mind, from what I referred to myself between 2007 and 2008 — a Christian Mystic.

I thought American philosophy began and ended with Emerson. More accurately, I thought the logical outcome of the brand of American philosophy inaugurated by Emerson was the establishment of a literary character, rather than a place in a tradition reserved for philosophers. It seemed to me like the works of Thoreau and Whitman, being so influenced by Emerson, constituted the synthesis between the forces at work determining the 'American character' and those determining a new way of living, prescribed by this character. Or even more accurately, perhaps, when people described Emerson as the first American philosopher, I heard in their statement a tone of sarcasm, as if such a distinction were paltry, or embarrassing to admit. It wouldn't be until I read William James that I realized an American could challenge Kant, or even disregard the Konigsberg giant entirely. Still, I thought all American philosophy followed a principle set out by the Founding Fathers: that the highest standing among the populace be open to experimentation. Or to have such freedom to define what experimentation is and could be. It's a lot like the tone of "The American Scholar," a lecture Emerson gave in front of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University (kids who already had their lives planned out for them, including one Henry David Thoreau).

Emerson went on the lecture circuit, sure, though not exactly like Twain, who travelled to see what he never would have seen. Emerson visited England. He went to California. He fell in love with Vesuvius. He did all the things and went to all the places that men of means of Concord, Massachusetts still do and go to. Except that he also gave an entire country permission to do what people in countries had been doing their own specific ways for millenia. Though in a letter to the President he speaks to a vehement disagreement with the Cherokee displacement, there isn't — to my knowledge — any

mention in Emerson's writings of a philosophy present in the culture of the "American" indigenous peoples. Who Emerson stood for were the intellectual whites of means.

Nevertheless, I felt like he held the second book of life in his hands when I read that he wrote "I am not solitary whilst I write, though no one is with me. But if a man be alone, let him look at the stars."

The stars are people and the wind is a nomadic tribe in the future. It's more advantageous to my thinking to admit what I think I know for sure than to admit what I am searching for, that I am searching at all. I knew that, after a photography class, I began to see how unpatterned things were without my intervening. Still, my intervening wasn't a focus, but the formal expression of a nomos, where the things seen were seen as signs of a transcendental inkwell, that would give it vitality, and did, but only when my eyes were, so to speak, trained on the sparrow. Though it was important my ecological understanding tarried so long in an aesthetical mode, the aesthetic remained closed off from the properly ethical. I say 'properly' because every aesthetics is an ethics, at least, of sense. However, when one discovers — as I did when I went to college — that not everyone has the same access to the kind of aesthetic opportunities, an ethics of the multiple begins to make itself known. Not everyone lives in the woods. The question of access flared my indignity. It wouldn't be until I visited Brooklyn at the age of 25 that I would realize that there are different aesthetic accesses. What I assumed (and I believed that I was following Emerson here) was that everyone not only had the capacity to "appreciate" "Nature", but they had the same capacity, which is ridiculous at best and racist in the worst. I'm thinking of Heidegger finding the affirmation of a popular Dasein

in the Blood and Soil rhetoric of Nazism. Unlike Emerson's, Heidegger's metaphysics saw itself coming to fruition in the blockage of possibilities rather than a catalytic tool for the digressive tendencies of a future. Sadly for capitalists, for moralists and for Christians, Emerson's future refuses representational form. Now, if I'd like to preserve anything of auxiliary relation to "Nature," it would be a belief in sensation, such that it is sensation and not a 'good or common sense' that allows us (that is, creatures) access to a temporality that exceeds us, such as the way the color green "greens," or how the water of which our bodies are made possesses a lunar rhythm.

I used to try to impress girls who read Sartre, who I saw as an enemy to Transcendentalism, by espousing a sort of apolitical optimism I thought characteristic of the Concord Group. Of course, Thoreau couldn't help but be political, which I obstinately understood in libertarian terms. My ignorance stemmed not from one relative to the actual political leanings of the Concord Group, but my own ignorance to how a certain political order enabled me to be 'without' a politics. I wished so full-heartedly that girls would identify something innate to their femininity that bore resemblance to Transcendentalism. I wished, in particular, that my speaking of Transcendental principles would amaze them, give them euphoric pleasure, which they would associate forever with me, my voice and intellect. This would, then, allow me to become in some way their guide through a higher understanding of forms and, I believed, a comprehension of their body's sacred properties, standing counterpoint to their limited, cheap understanding of how sacred and satisfying a 'union of bodies' could be following a set of principles. I disregarded for as long as I could the comprehension of my own femininity, and how I

rerouted it, as well as how this made me susceptible to a clouding of rational judgement and a surfeit of personal judgement. I couldn't be gay because I understood "Nature" on purely erotic terms: the endless proliferation of penises into vaginas. I couldn't be a feminist, either, believing such a cause (though noble) eliminated the tried and true methodology of conservation of resources by a mandated asceticism or renouncing of certain pleasures. It was in my masculine power to recognize heterosexual forms in the phylogenesis of trees and leaves, the sunken soddennnes of karst formations and the propulsions of birds. I remember coming across a small cave overlooking the river, and with the moss coming down over the top of it, thinking of a hairy pussy, imagining myself tall enough to stick my head inside. I remember using the water from a natural spring at the edge of my aunt and uncle's property to lubricate my penis to masturbate. Somewhere between 2010 and 2012, I dropped the capital "N" in Nature for its more materialist daughter, "nature." Remained fastened to my tropes.

## II.

In my "Nature Journal" I wrote several entries at what I called "Church," weekly visits to the river:

"With this notebook, I'd like to start chronicling my search for truth that is in nature/wilderness/wildness. What I aim to do — keeping myself well-conditioned to the discipline of journaling — is to account every and all encounters of the three areas

forespoken, whether that be nature-walk, fishing, hunting, hiking/backpacking, getting lost, sexual interaction, love, loss of focus, etc.”

“Moss beds (I think that’s what they are) are wonderful — soft as animal fur, pliant as wet clay. It’s textures like these that keep me attached (‘at the hip,’ so to say) to the natural world, these sensually sensorial experiences that I am reminded of, and my mind harkens back to, partaking in the pleasures of the world of men.”

“I really hope my sketches get better.”

“I realize, in my creative life, I’ve been so reticent to divulge my experiences in nature, probably because they are held at such a level of sanctity I wish not to diminish their significance. Once, I thought it would be nice to make love to a girl out here, but I was misguided in my thought. I would be making love to nature (the ‘out here’) through the girl.”

“Last night N., J. and I went out and found K. They had persuaded me to bring her along wherever we went so I could see where things went, and I happily consented to the plan. We ended up going to Club Vogue, a strip club. I rub K’s back and thighs the whole night but she wouldn’t let me kiss her. The guys paid a little extra so I could get a private ‘surprise’ from the stripper on stage. She handed me one of the dollars ‘Put this in your mouth, I WILL take it from you.’ She wrapped her thighs around my head and began writhing her pelvis, nose-deep in her pussy, her soft skin scratching against my ears. She

bent her torso closer and took the dollar in her mouth, then shoved my face in her tits and shimmied. She smelled nice. K. laughed for what seemed like hours. The rest of the night I tried to get K. to bed but nothing happened, she wasn't having any of it, she'd stand up from the couch every time I tried to get close. Disappointing.”

— I was so close, perhaps too close, to see what I was missing. Thought what I wanted was power. Even poetry could be power. Dominion over. Making decisions over that which I thought was owed to me. My only models for coming on too strong had been met with beatific satisfaction, giving my all to God. People weren't other people. They were like angels to me.

They were, to me, like angels.

“Last Sunday, I did not go to church. For two weeks I have felt paralyzed, physically, mentally, mostly spiritually. But good things happen even in dark, deep times — especially, in some cases, in those times. Last Saturday threat of rain hung above Columbia all day. This was not only made evident by the low-hanging, speckled grey clouds, but a sense that everything living could feel some urging, something heavy and maybe, just maybe, and maybe even hopefully, purifying — even the birds knew, staying in flight, floating crosses in the still waters of a pond.”

“I want my life to feel. I want my life-poetry to feel. I want my life, my life-poetry, my vibrance, my soul, my essence, my angel to feel my body, and I want my body to feel my



soul in other bodies, grow, swell with electricity at the sense of other souls in other bodies and in nothing, in stillness, in quiet.”

“Taking K. to church, hopefully like a tour more than a desecration (too strong of a word for my purposes, but it’ll have to do). I should also mention that she is in need of some stillness, so I’m looking at this, initially, as performing a service.”

“It was interesting, which was at least what I wanted. She’s very beautiful, and we talked more about the metaphysics of life, the beauty of nature, and religion more than we ever have. She was so naturally accustomed to the words...I kind of fell in love with her again, which is bad, possibly, b/c I think she doesn’t, possibly, reciprocate those feelings. Either way, her beauty (physical) and the odd yet characteristic beauty and overtones of her lulled speech, mixed and set with the beauty of the woods really made me...happy. Content, and beautiful as well. All in all, I just want contact with someone. That’s all, CONTACT, skin to skin, warmth to warmth.”

“Anyway, the musing consisted of yearning for the human asshole, male and female, yearning to be one again with the maternal genitalia which sought forth my passage into the poisonous oxygenated world of the outside.”

“Nothing much happened today, regardless. The bare trees are still beautiful; the moss is still green and fragrance-less, K. is still beautiful and still full of so much wildness...it emanates like smoke from her center. She exudes it.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about photography’s inherent biased representation of people. How, it seems to me, it’s a love and appreciation of people, yes, but mixed with a contempt for existence. Like, maybe to love something enough to deem it worthy of representation there must be hate felt, too. Hate is an interesting word, that which doesn’t — has never — get much use or analysis. But, I can’t deny, it is there, in the very specific darkness of chiaroscuro, in the deep heart of everything perceived as beautiful.”

“Overcast, just as any Sunday in winter should be. I look back on Sundays in the past and they’re always overcast or raining. It was foggy this morning. I wondered if there’d be any on the river, but it’s around 11 now and it seems that if there was any fog it’s already gone. Still, though, the special reserved silence that comes after fog remains, like being in the presence of one’s mistress or the moment your mother and father say or do something which tells your adolescent self that all you were, all you thought you had, all of the familiarities, weren’t as real as you imagined and now you must start your whole life reborn — such is adulthood — and learn more and become familiar with other families and forge and establish your own bonds.”

“My Philosophy:

Living life like a truth (the opposite of what Thoreau called a life of ‘quiet desperation’) much like the lesser alternative relies on promises, either personal or doctrinal (despite being doctrinal in reality they are made personal) yet it is a much more difficult road of

flight (and it is flight, as any living is flight) and requires a more focused admiration of peace and tranquility, though, in essence, those (peace & tranquility) are the same in mode both of living. It also requires forgiveness: the ability to forgive others, to be forgiven by others, and also to forgive oneself. The latter practice being almost the most important to exercise — undoubtedly the most difficult. Also one must truly believe in heaven and God — not as separate, distant places — but the Mind and the unkillable Self.

The Self, being God, is omnipotent (even ‘omnipotent’ is limiting), and possesses the ability, power, authority, and possibility to annihilate Heaven, which is the Mind.

Four Principles:

1. Unprejudiced perception; educated love. (Educated meaning ‘you know what you love, always.’)
2. Service is the highest form of Heaven.
3. Self-forgiveness is the highest form of God.
4. Prayer goes to whomever, whenever, forever.
5. If one adheres to these principles, everything will always ‘work out,’ everything will always ‘be okay.’”

III.

Emerson became famous for having ideas. That’s all I wanted for myself. The first time I kissed someone’s mouth, I realized that it wasn’t the mouth I appreciated, but the hair as

it hung down into my hands. The mouth, I realized, could have come from anywhere. So even the absence of particularity had been gendered. This wasn't in the woods, but in a bed in a house on a street in town. I began to smoke cigarettes and finally began to move away from what I thought was an anthropocentric perspective of ecological processes. Somehow I kept coming around. I keep coming around. I had never intended to take what I desired by force, and so I never did. Though I felt compelled to reach the edge. Like in the movies. My impulse now is to situate my desire to confess this within the same thin face-saving as it would have been to show force. I know that the men I know can't let anything guarded go tested. We say "I yearn for it to be in contact with me" (Whitman). The common phrase also harbors a negative conception of a 'consenting land.' Or should it be a landscape capable of consent? Even the deepest of ecologists would have a difficult time reconciling that, I feel.

From the perspective of temporal distance, the I that I was comes out somewhere in between comedy and tragedy. As it were, every Midwestern boy has the story he tells at his wedding and the one he keeps locked away in his wife. Only I knew how much I wanted an ocean of hard oak trees to swallow me up, or come crashing down, pushing every conceivable bone through the skin. Or maybe it was glaring. I hadn't, at that time, ever thought of thought (in general) and certainly never thought of it as an archipelago, able to keep sprouting up anew. I thought about sex and about suicide, or I thought other's thoughts in relation to those concepts. It would be years before I read the infamous squirrel passage in James' Pragmatism, which makes me laugh and reminds me of Twain's early work, immediately legible. And it would be even longer — living then

in the place where many of these men were born — before I would walk along the Charles River reading “How To Make Our Ideas Clear” and having a reaction akin to waking after a near suffocation.

What is the first circle, I wonder, in the cosmogony of an 18 year old heart?

IV.

Every time I visit Emerson’s house I run my fingers along the grooves in the floor — which are not the original floors — trying to pick up some lingering essence of movement of the man. The books that line the walls behind locked gates are not even his real books, but simulated slip-cases. I notice Nietzsche’s *The Will To Power*, the one Nietzsche’s Nazi sister edited, and which would have confused Emerson more than Nietzsche’s other work, if he’d ever read it. This is where I found out about the chair where he used to hide his Bible, a story of which only the tour guide seemed to know the source. I think of him sitting at his desk, his white wisps flying, his bare feet hot on the boards, obstinately attached to the tradition. “I write to differentiate myself,” he would say. After having attempted to write my grief an entire decade full of the kind of failure which compels me to keep writing it, further separating me from my life, I’ve learned to combine the two, grief and life. Grife? I’d like to call this a form of gripe. What I really wish is to become, finally, imperceptible to myself. Wiped out save all effect. I know that precious little of my own life is ever genuinely recorded, or needs be. I have no excuse

but to keep pressing save. And still I love this life because it keeps calling me from the past to catch up to it.