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# NATURE'S GOD: EMERSON AND THE GREEKS

*Peter Murphy*

ABSTRACT The essay explores the mystical impulse in the American mind, reflected in the work of William James, Kenneth Burke, and most especially the case of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The parallels and differences between Emerson's mystical idea of Nature and the ancient Greek pre-Socratic idea of the universe as a union of opposites are explored. The divergence between the Americans and the Greeks concerning the idea of limits is reflected on. The optimism of the Americans is explained as a function of their mystical theodicy, and the greatness of their power as a function of their mystic ability, so well assayed by Emerson, to bear crushing paradoxes with a cheerful lightness of being.

KEYWORDS Deism \* Emerson \* Jefferson \* Lincoln \* Bob Dylan \* mystic \* America \* Plato \* Pre-Socratic \* Stoic \* William James \* Kenneth Burke \* slavery \* Christianity \* liberty \* nature \* God

The Americans performed an unusual Hegelian operation on the Protestant religion that they imported from Europe. They turned it on its head.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who became America's foremost philosophical essayist, was the beneficiary and perpetuator, and one could even say the mighty consolidator, of this spiritual gymnastics.

Emerson conceived religion in non-literary terms. In this, he was in agreement with the main current of American Protestants. Bookish religion had already been dismissed by eighteenth-century Deists. Jefferson literally took the scissors to the Bible. After the First Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century, bookish religion in America faded yet further and faster.

The consequence of this is well known to everyone of my age and generation. It is called pop music, America's most potent export to the world after film. Non-literary

religions, or to give them their proper name, mystic religions, are great for the visual arts and music. The American gift for popular music has its source in this. It grew out of the mystic religion of America.

Emerson provides a very useful guide to understand the peculiar religiosity of America. Mostly he is a good guide because he manages to articulate what is inarticulate, and yet so resonant, in so much American religious feeling. This is a sense of the sacred as all-pervading or pantheistic.

The most powerful transformation that America performed on Protestantism was to turn it into a vernacular mysticism. This is a religion that relies neither on the Word nor the Book.

About a quarter of Americans report that they believe in a ‘Distant God’.<sup>1</sup> This God is not active in the world. This is not a punitive, angry, or judging God. It is neither sweet nor benevolent. This God does not judge or punish. This God does not care.

Rather the Distant God is a cosmic force that sets the laws of nature in motion and permeates Nature. It is this God that has mystical overtones.

The idea of mysticism is easily misunderstood. When talked up, it often ends up as the province of cranks and buffoons. Yet it was William James, the great American philosopher and the brother of Henry James, who identified mysticism as one of the principal modes of religious experience (James: 379-429). William and his brother, the brilliant American novelist, were the offspring of Henry Snr. (Henry Walsh James) whose own religious beliefs were a half-way house between Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism and the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg who himself had a deep impact on the thought of Emerson.

William James clearly inherited an excellent feeling for mysticism from his upbringing. William’s account of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is exceptionally insightful. He skillfully surveys traditions of Hindu, Sufi, Christian and Buddhist mystics. He concludes that these traditions are remarkably similar, and describes the principal generic characteristics of mysticism in the following way:

*First*, mysticism ‘invariably’ is ‘reconciliation’. It is as if everything was ‘rolled into unity’ (James: 389).

*Second*, it is non discursive. Instead of speech and writing it emphasizes intuition and the art of breathing (*pneuma*) and meditative concentration.

*Third*, the primary medium of mystical truth is not conceptual speech but short-lived episodes of ecstasy, excitement, elevation, elation, and ebriety.<sup>2</sup>

*Fourth*, mysticism unleashes an indomitable spirit and energy, often in the form of great suffering. It entails a typical paradox of the mystic—that I am tormented by not being allowed to suffer enough.<sup>3</sup>

*Fifth*, paradox is the mystical cast of mind. Mystics have no difficulty imagining states of unrestful rest, vast shallowness, dazzling obscurity, reverberating silence or teeming deserts.

*Sixth*, the primary mood of the mystic is the optimistic yes-state, the state of elation. Whereas the sobriety of the saint diminishes, discriminates and says ‘no’, the exuberant spiritual drunkenness of the mystic expands, unites and says ‘yes’.

In the American setting, certain aspects of mysticism can probably be best understood as the sociologist Kenneth Burke did (Burke: 197). Mysticism is a conception of the ultimate order of things. This is because, as Burke explains, the mystic invariably aims to encompass conflicting orders of motivation—such as body and spirit. The mystic does this not by outlawing any order but by finding a place for each order in a ‘developmental’ series. One term leads into another, ensuring that the completion of each leads to the next.

Burke observes that when the vocabulary of the mystic is most accurate, we do not find a flat antithesis between body and spirit but rather the body is treated as *a way into* the spirit. The antitheses of vocabulary, thus, are short cuts to each other. They are harsh ways of presenting the extremities of the developmental communion of body and spirit.

The analogy with language, and Burke’s treatment of mysticism using the techniques of the literary theorist, has its limits. For the paradox of the mystic is to talk about what can not (ultimately) be spoken about. **‘My love she speaks like silence/Without ideals or violence’** (Dylan: 1965). Emerson lived this paradox. In his *Essays*, he draws on Stoic, Platonic, and Neo-Platonic ideas to formulate a sense of God as Nature, enveloping and pervading all things. This nature is not discursive. It is not

prescriptive. It is not a citable authority. ‘The faith that stands on authority is not faith,’ Emerson remarks (226).<sup>4</sup> The deists of America’s founding generation often avoided the term God altogether. They talked about ‘Providence’ or the ‘Being in whose hands we are’. The God of Nature was ‘the Power that rules the destinies of the Universe’. Americans today still speak in deist terms about a ‘higher power’.

Nature’s God is not the God of any particular religion—it is not even obviously the Christian God. It is not the God of tradition or the God of rhetoric (224). ‘*The soul answers never by words*’ (219). This maxim of Emerson’s indicates something essential about American religion. It is not, or at least a major part of it is not, a literary tradition. It is not creedal or discursive. It is not a religion of reason. Emerson puts it simply this way: one cannot ‘answer in words’ anyone who asks a metaphysical question (219). For any possible description of God is a description that does not describe.

Emerson called this Nature, or Nature’s God, the ‘over soul’. This is not a particularly elegant term. In fact it is very inelegant. It has none of the precision of the term that it mimicked—the Stoic ‘world soul’. Nonetheless the Nature propounded by the Stoics and by Emerson shared many of the same attributes. Emerson described the over soul as the great nature in which we rest. It is like the earth cradled in the soft arms of the atmosphere (210). It is the Unity in which every person’s being is contained. Each of us lives in succession, division and parts but within each one of us is the soul of the whole. This is the eternal One, the wise silence, and the universal beauty to which every part and particle is related (211). If we see the world piece by piece, as sun, moon, animal and tree, the whole (of which these are parts) is the soul. The soul in Man is not an organ. Rather it animates and exercises all of the organs, and breathes through the intellect and the will (212).

Emerson (212) put it more or less exactly as the ancient Stoics had: the soul is breath (*pneuma*, spirit). And, like the Stoics, Emerson invites us to obey Nature. That is only reform worth considering, he suggests.

This Stoic idea of God is not in the least like the Creator God of the Hebraic Old Testament, the God of genesis (‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...’) Nor does it resemble the Mosaic God of the Ten Commandments, the God who issues moral ‘thou shalt’ to be obeyed. There is a Hebraic and Mosaic strain in American

religion, from which much remonstrating and finger pointing comes. But this moralizing strain is different from the belief in Nature's God. The American Emersonian God, like the ancient Stoic one, is pantheistic. This is not to say that it is simply Stoicism reborn. The spirit of it rather parallels those older Romans who merged Stoicism, and its sense of the world-soul, with Plato. This was not the Greek Plato but the Plato of Plotinus, the mystical Plato.

There are strong echoes of the Roman mystical Plato in Emerson's summoning of Being. This Being is compared with the ocean, the surge of the sea, and the stream of light. This Nature is unlike Greek nature. The Greeks were very conscious of limits. Mystical Nature in contrast is illimitable. It is vast (182). It refuses limits (183).

In many ways, Neo-Platonism is the perfect theory for a republic of expansion. Emerson's world without question is expansive. Virtue means 'adding' to this world, planting the deserts conquered from chaos and nothing (183). Accordingly, the soul's life is one of progress, not of station. The soul, in the sense of the world-soul, is capable of infinite enlargement (224). It is an 'immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed' (211). It is independent of all of the limits that circumscribe individuals (212). It is possessed of the 'power of growth' (224). It is set upon a course of 'enlargement' and 'divine expansion', 'up and onward forever more' (185).

But does this not raise the temptation of hubris? Perhaps it is the case that the cosmos, or the Stoic soul of the cosmos, is infinite, but are there not limits beyond which society and self should not step? Are there not limits to enlargement? Does not the power of growth invite overreach and disaster? Emerson answers this conundrum in this way: the waters of the ocean of infinity ebb and flow. The spirit, *pneuma*, is the breath in and out. Being is expansive but Being ebbs and flows, in and out. Being is tidal. Its grace is governed by gravity. The cosmos both grows and breathes. This permits it to be both vast and just (or at least benevolent).

This is important if we are to understand American theology, or more properly speaking American theodicy. This world, the world of the world-soul, is the best of all possible worlds. Its God (the soul, breath and spirit of the world) is good. It is a 'vast affirmation' that negates negation. Here we see the source of American optimism, the dominant social emotion of America. Of all possible things, here is the thing that

Europeans find most puzzling about Americans. They, the Americans, are incurable optimists. They are optimistic because they feel deeply that they live in the best possible world. Even the social critics whose business is to find fault, even the dissenters and the angry Americans, the ‘mad as hell’ fist shakers, feel that this is so at some deep level in some ineffable way.

The optimism of the Americans is in sharp contrast to dominant emotional tone of the Europeans. From the Gothic age onwards, the Europeans came to believe equally deeply in the ‘via negativa’. This is the idea that the animating spirit of life is negative and that Being is Nothingness. In contrast, America is the negation of this negation. Emerson put it this way: ‘Nothing’ may be the great Night on which the living universe paints itself, but no fact is begotten by this. For this ‘Nothing’, this Being that is Nothing, is vacuous: ‘... it cannot work, for it is not. It cannot work any good; it cannot work any harm...’ (182). Thus the soul always affirms an optimism, never a pessimism (183). Even evil is not a negation but part of this vast affirmation.

But surely that is naïve? How can evil possibly be for the good? Is this not a Panglossian sentiment? How can terrible things that happen to individuals and societies be reconciled with optimism? How can parents who have to live with the death of a child in a road crash know that grief and tragedy are only for a time but that goodness, remembrance, and love have no end? How is such a thing conceivable? Emerson’s answer is that everything has two sides: a good side and a bad side (182). Being human is paradoxical. The paradox of the human condition is that the worst leads to the best and the best to the worst. Our strength grows out of our weakness (80). For every gift that we have, we also have a defect (169). For every grain of wit in human beings there is a grain of folly (169). For every moment of power we have, comes one of privation. **Each President pays dearly for his White House**, concludes Emerson.

Thus evils exist, but they are governed by the remedial nature of the universe. Bad counsel rebounds on the giver of it (176). Causing a wrong causes the suffering of wrong.

This paradox echoes through the American experience. The founding American question was not ‘how do we achieve self-government?’ but how do with live in our own house with both liberty and slavery? That founding antinomy, of slavery and liberty, lies at the very heart of what is enigmatic about America.

Thomas Jefferson, as we know, was an enlightenment statesman and a southern slaveowner. He crafted a string of legislative proposals to shut the door on slavery in America. But most of them failed. They were rejected by his fellow legislators. Other lawmakers, later on, were more successful than Jefferson in outlawing some parts of the slave system.<sup>5</sup> But they were not successful enough. Jefferson understood the necessary, which is also to say tragic, consequences of his own failure and that of others.

He knew that **the national crime would bring forth a national punishment**, as Benjamin Rush warned.<sup>6</sup>

In his Second Inaugural Speech in 1865 Lincoln concluded that America would continue to pay the price of Civil War **‘until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword’**. This was the remedial justice of Heraclitus at work. It was great suffering incurred for great wrong doing.

Enslavement, the treating of a person as property, did not simply violate expectations of reciprocity. It was not merely unjust. Rather it placed the slave entirely beyond the compass of reciprocity. Slavery was wrong because the slave was cast outside of the very possibility of any kind of reciprocity. Slavery was absolutely unjust. Even the serf who was bound to the soil had an expectation of reciprocity—protection in exchange for labor. The slave had no such expectation. The slave could not rely on or appeal to the reciprocity of the Old Testament (**an eye for an eye**), or that of the Greeks (**measure for measure**), or that of the Christians (**love for love**).

Nature’s law is ‘give, and it shall be given you’. ‘Water and you shall be watered in turn’ (175). The violation of such reciprocity is a violation of Nature. The absolute denial of reciprocity is a double violation of Nature. Do it, and you shall be violated in turn.

People often appeal to ‘the law of Nature’ but also often find it difficult to explain what it is. When they do find an explanation, they frequently assume that the ‘law of Nature’ is ‘a moral law that is superior to existing social law’. Sometimes it is also supposed that there is a divine author of that moral law. Thus natural law is assumed to be scriptural, textual or prophetic. But Emerson’s ‘law of nature’ is none of these things. It does not command us to ‘be good’ or to ‘do good works’. It does not even command. It



simply states that as things expand, they ebb and flow. For every gain, there is a loss; for every rise, a decline. That is how nature is structured.

It is like breathing—in and out. This pneumatic nature includes human nature, social nature and cosmic nature.

Nature is a paradox. Nature is One, yet it is also Two. Nature is a Unity yet all things that are part of this One are Double, each one against another (175). For every right there is a wrong; for every good, a bad. The universe—that which is singular—is filled with all kinds of polarities. We have to negotiate hot and cold, light and dark, centrifugal and centripetal forces. Whatever we do, there are subtle remedial relations between ‘spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay’ (168).

The idea of Nature’s God is skeptical of scripts, texts, prophecies and commands. It is not the expression of a literary religion or a prophetic one. It does, though, owe something to the Pre-Socratic Greek view of the universe as a union of contrary forces and qualities. The Pre-Socratics, however, supposed that the universe was limited. Anything that expanded would eventually overstep a limit. At that point, Nature would remedy itself. Once something big grew too big, and threatened to extinguish something small, Nature would adjust the relationship between the big and the small, bringing them back into alignment.

American Nature, in contrast is without limit. It was not only Emerson who reflected this but also that other paradigmatic American thinker, John Dewey. Dewey (1948) insisted that because American Nature was unlimited, American thought had firmly divorced itself from the Greeks. Emerson, though, did something more striking. His Neo-Platonism allowed him to reconcile what Dewey thought as irreconcilable. From the Pre-Socratics and Plato comes the sense of the polarities of the universe and from the Romans, from Plotinus, comes the sense of the infinite and unlimited nature of the universe.

The expansion of Emerson’s Nature oscillates between poles. Its growth is antipodal and rhythmic. It moves forwards but also looks backwards. It is strong and weak, up and down, male and female. Its unlimited expansion thus entails inherent, inescapable, if paradoxical, limits.

**Peter Murphy** is Associate Professor of Communications at Monash University and author of *Civic Justice* (2001) and co-author with David Roberts of *Dialectic of Romanticism* (2004). Email: [Peter.Murphy@arts.monash.edu.au](mailto:Peter.Murphy@arts.monash.edu.au)

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<sup>1</sup> *The 2006 Baylor Religion Survey* reports that 31% of Americans believe in a punishing Old Testament God; 24% in a Distant God; 23% in a helping Benevolent God; and 16% in a Critical God. The Critical God observes the world and makes notes for rendering judgment in the after-life. Believe in a Distant God tends to be held by men more than women, and by high income earners and the college-educated.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, these are all characteristics of American popular music.

<sup>3</sup> The life story of the French philosopher mystic, Simone Weil, is a good example of this.

<sup>4</sup> All page references to Emerson's work are from Emerson, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> In 1854, in response to Senator Stephen Douglas, Lincoln elegantly summed up the legislative roll back of slavery to that date:

'In 1794, they prohibited an out-going slave trade--that is, the taking of slaves from the United States to sell.

In 1798, they prohibited the bringing of slaves from Africa into the Mississippi Territory--this territory then comprising what are now the States of Mississippi and Alabama. This was TEN YEARS before they had the authority to do the same thing as to the States existing at the adoption of the constitution.

In 1800, they prohibited AMERICAN CITIZENS from trading in slaves between foreign countries--as, for instance, from Africa to Brazil.

In 1803, they passed a law in aid of one or two States laws, in restraint of the internal slave trade.

In 1807, in apparent hot haste, they passed the law, nearly a year in advance, to take effect the first day of 1808--the very first day the constitution would permit--prohibiting the African slave trade by heavy pecuniary and corporal penalties.

In 1820, finding these provisions ineffectual, they declared the trade piracy, and annexed to it the extreme penalty of death. While all this was passing in the general government, five or six of the original slave States had adopted systems of gradual emancipation; by which the institution was rapidly becoming extinct within these limits.

Thus we see, the plain unmistakable spirit of that age, towards slavery, was hostility to the PRINCIPLE, and toleration, only by necessity.'

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Benjamin Rush, *Address upon Slavekeeping*.