Emerson’s “The Poet,” written between 1841 and 1843 and published in *Essays: Second Series* (1844)

For the text of the essay from an Emerson website, see

<http://www.emersoncentral.com/poet.htm>

*Key quotations with reading notes and discussion questions*

Paragraph 1

“Men seem to have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon soul. There is no doctrine of forms in our philosophy.”

“We were put into our bodies, as fire is put into a pan, to be carried about… But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact: Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture, and poetry. For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes, when we know least about it.”

Emerson’s transcendental idealism, inspired by both Plato and *Genesis*, expresses itself very strongly here: in the beginning was the Idea; forms in nature embody it only temporarily and are “dependent” upon it. A parallel is the soul/body distinction, memorably captured in E’s comparison of the soul in the body to a fire carried in a pan. God is the primary mover here, the prime creator, and will be an analog for the similar acts of genesis created by poets (poet in Greek means *maker*).

Yet Emerson also suggests in the very first sentence that we’ve *lost* this perception that the material world is secondary, the spiritual world primary—why? He suggests that we have forgotten we are “children of the fire” and now know “least about it,” being at two or three “removes.” What does he mean? Compare the quotations from paragraphs 23 and 25 below.

A larger issue here is, why begin the essay with these assertions? How do they relate to his vision of the strong poet’s role in human history? (Note that later, especially in paragraph 7, Emerson also makes a caustic distinction between weak, merely contemporary and fashionable poets, vs. strong, immortal ones not only of their own era. Only strong poets, in Emerson’s view, are truly *makers* and re-connect us to the spiritual.)

Paragraph 2

“The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common-wealth.”

Note that this is a somewhat odd use of the word *representative*: E says that the strong poet represents not us “partial” imperfect people but the “complete” person with all his or her faculties and potential fully developed. What kind of conception of representation or mimesis is this for art?

*Representative* of course also has other connotations for a representative democracy and Emerson’s ideas of the role that art, especially poetry, should play in a democracy—an issue he will turn to directly at the very end of his essay, when he says that no strong American poet has yet appeared. What does this passage suggest about the role the ancient art of poetry should play in the brave new (and imperfect) world of U.S. democracy of the 1840s?

Paragraph 5

“it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem” “thought is prior to the form” [cf Spenser, quoted later: “soul is form, and doth the body make”]

This is one of the most memorable early statements in the essay exploring the implications of Emerson’s Platonic/idealist philosophy for poetic as well as natural form. He will return to these ideas more directly in the middle of the essay. But note for now that E hints that poetic forms (meters) are not just secondary, with the idea primary; they also may be impermanent, changing over time in cultural history, just as natural forms also evolve in time. In short, poetic forms evolve in time.

Remember also that 1844 is the pre-Darwinian era; *Origin of Species* was not published until 1859. But theories of animal and plant species and forms not being immutable had circulated since the 1700s, notably connected to Lamarck, the discovery of dinosaur bones, and other developments, (though of course many still believed that species did not change since God’s creation of the world). Plus, the new science of geology gave poets and scientists an emerging understanding of a vast new temporal scale over which such changes could occur—the Earth was understood not to be c. 6000 years old (based on calculating the generations in the Old Testament) but much older, perhaps millions of years old. And it was understood to have undergone many cataclysmic upheavals, not just a single Flood—all of these preserved in geological strata now studied for the first time. How much do you know about the history of pre-Darwinian science, especially geology and biology in the 18th and 19th centuries? Let’s share what we know and test out its relevance for understanding Emerson’s comments about science in this essay. A wide-ranging reader, Emerson loved using new facts and theories gleaned from the sciences to think about human *cultural* history. He’s the great exemplar of the virtues of a liberal arts-and-sciences interdisciplinary education.

Paragraph 10

“Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value, as the carpenter's stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze.”

Both poetry and science, using nature, teach us to use symbolic thinking and abstraction and, through this, to discover hidden laws that govern creation. The parable of the carpenter’s cord (for measuring and also to use as a plumb-line) shows us that objects have two uses, one material and the other spiritual (as symbolized by “musical”). All objects or events, in nature or in human history, are not just useful in themselves, but also as *signs* or *types* telling a hidden story about what *created* them. Scientists look for natural laws shaping everyday appearances; Emerson’s ancestors the Puritans also repeatedly “read” the natural world and events in local and world history as signs of God’s intentions, and they called this method of interpretation *typology*. This and many of the next paragraphs in “The Poet” explore the uses of studying the physical world to discover its hidden significances. See the paragraph 17 excerpt below for one example of how Emerson used physical science, in this case geology and fossils, to give him a trope for understanding *linguistic* history.

Emerson makes many comparisons between the scientific method and the poet’s use of symbolic thinking. But does Emerson acknowledge any *tensions* between these two modes of thought?

Paragraph 14

“Beyond this universality of the symbolic language, we are apprised of the divineness of this superior use of things, whereby the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity, in this, that there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol. Thought makes every thing fit for use. The vocabulary of an omniscient man would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation. What would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illustrious, spoken in a new connexion of thought. The piety of the Hebrew prophets purges their grossness.”

More on the natural world as a text that both scientists and poets need to learn to read. Further, Emerson provocatively asserts here that for scientists and poets the rules of civilized propriety and the “distinctions we make” do not apply; they can study anything “lowly” or gross and find divine meanings in it. Whitman certainly took up this theme:

From Whitman, “Song of Myself,” section 24:

Through me forbidden voices,

Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,

Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,

I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,

Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Paragraph 15

“For, as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God, that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole, — re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight, — disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive, or the spider's geometrical web.”

This passage contains two of Emerson’s most controversial assertions, that a) evil or ugliness in the world is caused by “detachment from God,” and b) that visionary poetry may easily “dispose” of disagreeable facts. What do you think E means by these claims, and are they consistent with his Idealism? Does he treat evil or inequality or ugliness frivolously, as E’s critics sometimes charge, or is E saying something actually quite profound and traditional here—at least within the Protestant Christian tradition in which E was trained—when he says that the *source* of evil and its consequences is “detachment” from God?

Another approach to this passage: take E’s assertions above as true and explain why he says that the strong poet sees a connection between nature’s geometries (such as the spider-web) with the geometry/engineering of man-made things, such as Massachusetts mill-towns or railroad tracks.

Paragraph 16

“As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form. This is true science.”

Comment on Emerson’s conception of transparency here, and also on his notion that such a vision involves glimpsing and understanding not stability but “flowing or metamorphosis, … a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form.” Emerson’s sources of inspiration here include not just contemporary science and perhaps certain elements in Christian thought, but also Emerson’s reading in Eastern philosophy and religion, particularly Persian poetry (one of Emerson’s alter egos he called Saadi) and the Hindu *Vishnu Purana*, *Vedas*, and *Uphanishads*, all of which had been newly translated into English in the 19th century.

Paragraph 17

“language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptise her, but baptises herself; and this through the metamorphosis again.”

Explore Emerson’s fossil analogy further: what are some examples of how many ordinary nouns and verbs have a fossilized history, often revealing buried metaphors, picture-language, etc.?

Explore also Emerson’s definition of “what we call nature” in the latter part of this quotation: what is most striking about this definition to you, and why? Don’t ignore the figures of speech he uses as well as the straightforward assertions he makes. See also the next two quotations below.

Paragraph 19

“nature has a higher end, in the production of new individuals, than security, namely, *ascension*, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms.”

Paragraph 20

“This insight, which expresses itself by what is called Imagination, is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucid to others.”

What are the implications of Emerson’s view of natural forms and the hidden forces shaping them for *poetic* forms and for language itself?

Paragraph 23

“If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop.”

In this part of the essay Emerson moves to exploring how a strong poet, by having his imaginative powers more fully developed, may also help normal human beings realize the more limited potential of their faculties. Discuss Emerson’s claims in this passage and in the one quoted from paragraph 25 below. To what degree is Emerson’s language highly *democratic*, despite its elitism? Would you also agree that Emerson is working here on an idealistic credo for liberal arts education itself and how it may “liberate” all?

For a man who so celebrates the liberating powers of thought, why does Emerson claim that “every thought is also a prison” below? If so, how can we be liberated from such a prison?

Paragraph 25

“There is good reason why we should prize this liberation. The fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snow-storm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door, is an emblem of the state of man. On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying. The inaccessibleness of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful. What if you come near to it, — you are as remote, when you are nearest, as when you are farthest. Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene.”

Paragraph 30

“I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante's praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.”

Paragraph 33

“Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out.' Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible. All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into a Noah's ark, to come forth again to people a new world.”

These paragraphs were particularly inspirational for two of the best readers of this essay, the young Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Here’s just one example of how Emerson’s language as well as ideas are echoed in their work:

From Whitman, “Song of Myself,” section 25:

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,

It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,

Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?”