

EMERSONIAN VIRTUES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE: FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

by Emily Dumler-Winckler

Abstract. The natural sciences and religion are two of the primary modern social practices that, for better and worse, shape our relationship to nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson helps us to think about their relation to one another and the virtues needed for the perfection of each. His insights about virtue and the “religious sentiment” shed light on how we moderns might make a home of a world indelibly marked by science, technology, and anthropogenic change. In addition to the quintessentially Emersonian virtue of self-trust, the virtues of faith, hope, and love are vital for this home-making endeavor. Emerson, thus, prefigures what prominent environmental ethicists have described as a “turn to virtue in climate ethics,” as well as what some see as a return to religious communities, values, and ideals, as the way forward. By guiding readers through Emerson’s early work *Nature* and his late essay “Worship,” this article provides an account of these three traditionally theological Emersonian virtues of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson; ethics; faith; grace; nature; religion; spirituality; theology and science; theology of nature; virtue

*NATURE spoke
To each apart, lifting her lovely shows
To spiritual lessons pointed home . . .*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Address Read before the ΦBK Society at Cambridge,” July 18, 1867

Ralph Waldo Emerson declared in “An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College” (1838, hereafter “Divinity Address”) that it is by “the religious sentiment,” and “not by science or power,” that “the universe is made safe and habitable.”¹ He and his fellow Transcendentalists eagerly embraced the insights of the second scientific revolution of the

Emily Dumler-Winckler is Assistant Professor of Constructive Theology and Christian Ethics in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, USA; email: emily.dumlerwinckler@slu.edu.

nineteenth century. But they were also keenly aware of the limitations and dangers that attend *certain* modern scientific practices and Enlightenment views of nature—disenchanted views that tend to alienate us from nature, God, one another, and ultimately from our own agency—views that celebrate our power to either dominate creation and its creatures or become impervious to its perils through stoic detachment. The modern temptation is to think that it is by these forms of knowledge or power that the world is made safe and habitable. In fact, they have had quite obvious toxic effects. Ironically, both views—that human beings are meant to dominate or to withdraw from nature—have long been attributed to Emerson (see West 1989, 17 ff. for the former; Richardson 1996, 233–34, for the latter). I suggest rather that much of Emerson’s work is devoted to a consideration of the virtues and religious sensibilities that moral agents would need to overcome both forms of alienation, to make a home of the modern world we inhabit.

In this sense, Emerson prefigures what prominent Christian environmental ethicists have described as a “turn to virtue in climate ethics,” as well as what some see as a return to religious communities, values, and ideals, as the way forward.² Indeed, Emerson may be the proto-theologian and theorist of the Anthropocene *par excellence*.³ He saw with piercing clarity the power of human beings to shape and be shaped by our environment for better and for worse. Although Emerson could not have foreseen the extent of geophysical and climate change of the present era, he was not naive about the perilous power of either humans or nature. The “subtheme of savagery in nature and in man” runs the gamut of his work (Richardson 1996, 273). For this reason, Emerson is keenly interested in the virtues needed to perfect human beings in relation to nature. The natural sciences and religion are two of the primary modern social practices that shape this relationship.⁴ Emerson helps us to think about their relation and the virtues needed for the perfection of each, the virtues needed to help us moderns make a home of a world indelibly marked by science, technology, and anthropogenic change.

For my purposes, two texts are particularly pertinent: his early essay *Nature* (1836), and his late essay “Worship” (1868).⁵ Each invites the reader on a journey of spiritual ascent, whereby she comes to see herself and her relation to the world in new ways. Here we find that, in addition to the paradigmatic Emersonian virtue of self-trust, the traditionally theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are crucial for making a home of such a world (see Aquinas 1981, ST I-II.62; Cladis 2009).

THE ANTHROPOCENE

At the outset, it may help to say a word about the kind of problem or crisis we are facing in the Anthropocene, and how, if at all, this conundrum differs from those imagined by the Transcendentalists. We, humans, have

always managed to create our own worst nightmares. I take it that contributing to the degradation of a planet that could become inhospitable to a large portion of human, animal, and plant life is one such nightmare. But history is peppered with such horrors. The Transcendentalists gravitated to questions of personal, social, political, and environmental transformation, particularly in the face of overwhelming social evils such as slavery and poverty. The crises facing us in the Anthropocene seem to differ from these in degree and scale, but I am not convinced (as Willis Jenkins argues) that they differ in kind (Jenkins 2013, 1–15). Are the challenges posed by the Anthropocene altogether different from those facing Orestes Brownson, when he, in “The Laboring Classes,” imagined overturning not only the institution of slavery, but the system of wage labor? Is it altogether different from those who sought to stop the genocide and displacement of native peoples, or from those who wonder today how we might put an end to human trafficking, quash racism or sexism, and ameliorate their institutional and systemic effects?

Perhaps the difference is that we must collectively face this threat of our own devising—no one will be unscathed. But in the moral realm this has always been true. So too with natural disasters—plagues, famines, earthquakes, and hurricanes. As always, injustice will ensure that the poor bear the brunt of the burden. Still, all persons are more and less complicit and all will suffer the effects of this collaborative degradation (see Evich 2017; Sideris 2015a, b). I suggest that the ethical problems facing us in the Anthropocene are similar in kind to the ethical problems that face us in these other large scale sociopolitical crises.⁶ Because the magnitude of the problem is overwhelming, personal responsibility complex, complicity pervasive, and collective action vital, such crises require multifaceted considerations of spiritual transformation at the individual, social, and political levels.

NATURE: AMAZING GRACE

Emerson published *Nature* in the midst of a “gloomy epoch” in 1836 (1128). Tuberculosis had recently claimed his first wife, Ellen Tucker, and his brother Charles. The questions that consumed him during this time, the questions at the heart of this work, are “[T]o what end is nature? . . . Whence is it? And Whereto?” (2, 40, 43–44). Tutored by Romantics such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Emerson suspects that common people as well as the scientists, poets, prophets, and bards have insight in this matter. Everyone, each by her own genius, can make the journey of ascent to the heights of the religious sentiment. Yet each faces her own vocational hazards and temptations. These, among other lessons, can only be discovered along the way. The dialectical method of the essay becomes obvious enough to the attentive reader. But for precisely

this reason there are important tuitions at each step, insights for inhabitants of the Anthropocene.

Nature famously begins with provocation: “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers 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?” (7). In the “Divinity Address,” he commissions the “newborn bards of the Holy Ghost” to “love God without mediator or veil,” and to “Teach that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake” (89). Biographies, histories, and criticism *in se*, are not the problem. Emerson himself interweaves these genres in his lectures and essays. But his are not merely backward-looking, derivative, second-hand accounts. They say and assay something in the present, with an eye to the future. When we arrive at the penultimate chapter of *Nature*, “Spirit,” we learn that “It is essential to a true theory of nature and of man, that it should contain somewhat progressive” and not just retrospective elements (40).⁷ The final chapter, “Prospects,” reiterates the point.

In the “Introduction,” Emerson provides crucial hints about two terms that appear throughout the essay and his later work: “science” and “Nature.” “All science has one aim,” he states, “namely, to find a theory of nature . . . Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is that it will explain all phenomena” (7). Here we find a portrait of science, broadly conceived, unified by a common aim. In “Uses of Great Men,” he suggests that “Engineer, broker, jurist, physician, moralist, theologian, and every man, inasmuch as he has any science, is a definer and map-maker of the latitudes and longitudes of our condition” (620). With his medieval and early modern forbears, Emerson regards theology as a science in this sense. If we think of every person who has any such knowledge as a cartographer of our condition, we might think of practitioners of religion and natural science as mapping particular aspects of our condition.⁸ “Genius,” for Emerson, “is the naturalist or geographer of the supersensible regions, and draws their map” (622). The genius of whatever stripe, whether theologian, poet, or “Man of science” (he would never adopt the neologism “scientist”) acquaints us with the supersensible regions of the religious sentiment.⁹ All works of genius are “a species of worship of the Supreme Being” (76). For Emerson, a poet’s musings “shall be theology for the next age” (Emerson 1972, 75).

The scientist and religious practitioner alike provide us with more or less reliable knowledge about the world—about deep space and forgiveness, about physical and spiritual health—in the same way as topographic, topological, subway, and road maps orient us to different aspects of the same city. Each helps us to navigate the world we inhabit. Each, in various ways, proves useful. Following the first chapter, the four subsequent chapters of *Nature* are about various ways that human beings use and enjoy nature.¹⁰

As for “Nature,” Emerson provides an unusually explicit description of the term: “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (8). This expansive notion of nature dispenses with any clear distinction between nature and culture or art, between first and second nature. Nonetheless, using the word in *both* its common and philosophical senses should not create any confusion, he thinks, because the distinction is sufficiently clear. “Nature in the common sense,” he writes “refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (*natura naturata*) (8). By way of contrast, “Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture” (*natura naturans*) (8).

If we sought proof that Emerson did not grasp the extent of humanity’s impact on nature, in the common sense, this might be sufficient. Yet Emerson seems to be at least aware of the basic anthropogenic dilemma. He continues, humanity’s “operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result” (8). Notice, Emerson does not claim that humanity does not change or affect nature. For what else is a house or a canal? The claim is that because of the seemingly insignificant or incremental nature of human activity—a little chipping, building, spilling, burning, recycling—we hardly *notice* the changes. This observation seems in keeping with the dilemma described by environmental ethicists today. One challenge is changing our perceptions about the extent of our collective impact on nature. In this sense, to acknowledge anthropogenic change, the ubiquitous mixing of the will with nature (in the common sense), calls into question any clear or easy distinction between Emerson’s two senses of the word. Nonetheless, his philosophical notion of nature may be well suited for the task of environmental ethics in the Anthropocene.

“NATURE”: HOW SWEET THE SOUND

Both “Nature” (Chapter 1 of *Nature*) and the “Divinity Address” begin with depictions of sublime beauty, portraits of the natural world meant to garner the cognitive ascent needed for spiritual ascent. Indeed, in the address, Emerson would lead the Harvard graduates up a shortcut to the summit of *Nature*, the “religious sentiment.” In *Nature*, Emerson commends the sublimely starry heavens, rather than a study with books, to those who seek solitude (9). Remarkably, this gift of sublime beauty comes to those in the “streets of cities” (9). Following the Romantic trend, Emerson typically extols the woods and rural landscapes as places of spiritual

renewal, contemplation, and ecstasy. In the woods, one can find “perpetual youth,” and return “to reason and faith” (10). But here he begins by pointing out a sublimity available to city and country dwellers alike (a commonality terminated in our time by technological progress). One need only step outside on a clear night to awaken a certain reverence of the stars. “Every night come out these envoys of beauty and light the universe with their admonishing smile” (9).

This curious line signals the sublimity and beauty of nature. Tutored by Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Emerson knows that sublimity and beauty, for all their possible distinctions, *both* mark the limits of human knowledge (Burke 2009). Both catch us somewhat by surprise and bestow a sense of pleasure, delight, fear, or awe. But, whereas for Burke (at least early on), the sublime and beautiful are so distinct it is “almost . . . impossible to think of reconciling them in the same subject,” for Emerson their reconciliation is crucial to the moral psychology of ascent, or this-worldly home-making (Burke 2009, 192).

Consider Burke’s account. The beautiful—characterized by littleness, weakness, and imperfection—is pleasing to the senses and so arouses love. Picture daisies, babies, and women. The sublime—characterized by power, vastness, and greatness—elicits the idea of pain mixed with delight and so conjures fear and awe. Think of God, black holes, and men. The beautiful is beautiful, the sublime sublime, and never the twain shall meet. According to this moral psychology, “we submit to what we admire [the sublime], but we love what submits to us [the beautiful]” (Edmund Burke 2005, 192)

But if the stars are sublime “envoys of beauty” that greet us with an “admonishing smile,” then it is by way of love, humility, and awe that we submit to what we admire. The natural responses to this gift, this shining “city of God,” are faith and love, to “believe and adore” (9). For “Nature never wears a mean appearance” but “Neither does the wisest man extort her secret” (9).¹¹ For those with eyes to see, ears to hear, nature remains sublime, somewhat beyond our comprehension, never a mere plaything, ever admonishing us against hubris. And yet, it is not a source of terror. For nature’s beauty woos and intoxicates us. The sun rises and we are deified; the admonishing stars smile and we worship the source of our being. This piety pervades Emerson’s work.¹²

The problem, at this point, is that few of us have eyes to see or ears to hear (10). We do not see rightly or well; we are blind. Blindness is a matter of half-sight, of seeing with one’s eyes alone. Conversely, the “lover of nature” who sees with her heart discovers, even in the midst of sorrow, a “wild delight” in the presence of nature. Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth-century theorists of the sublime, disagreed about whether the sublime power to produce this delight resides in nature without or within. Revealing his debts to both aesthetes, Emerson clarifies that “the

power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or [crucially] in harmony of both" (11).

This opening provides crucial context for what follows: Emerson's own ecstatic, sublime, experience. Far from *mere* ambles in the woods (as if there could be any such thing after Thoreau's "Walking"), the wilderness is the site of Emerson's ecstasy in this gloomy season. Crossing a "bare common" Emerson, much to his own surprise, enjoys "a perfect exhilaration," and finds himself "glad to the brink of fear" (10). This sublime moment is followed by that of the notorious "transparent eye-ball."¹³ In the woods, for a moment, he feels as though no tragedy or sorrow can come to him that 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; . . . I am part or parcel of God." In this ecstatic moment, egotism vanishes. He is nothing, yet he sees all, namely himself as a conduit for the currents of Universal Being.

Critics have roundly noted the seemingly stoic, world-renouncing implications of this self-emptying kenosis. As Laura Walls observes, "to see all is to see nothing in particular" (100). The next line, a somewhat Augustinian refrain, appears to confirm the suspicion: "The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental . . . I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty" (Emerson 1983, 10). Those who doubt whether the lover of immortal beauty can love a particular friend may find it reassuring that, ironically in a somewhat less sublime moment, Emerson finds such a friend in Raphael's transfigured Christ (437). But we need not go to his essay "Art" for this discovery.

In the next moment, we discover that this is a relational ecstasy. And this provides an important clue about how to read the rest of the book. The ministry of the woods and fields, like the Paris museum, suggests "an occult relation between man and the vegetable" (11). In the moment of his greatest delight, Emerson was not alone after all: "They nod to me, and I to them." Yet, he warns that we must "use these pleasures with great temperance." The very same landscape that spread a banquet of delights yesterday may be shrouded in melancholy today. What makes the difference? A person who "has just lost by death a dear friend" will feel a certain contempt of the scenery: "The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population."

Ever a student of John Milton, Emerson submits that earthly love refined "is the scale by which to heav'nly Love thou maist ascend" (*Paradise Lost*, Book VIII: 592). Love of beauty mortal and immortal, especially at its most sublime, is of a piece. Far from a peripheral pleasantry, the opening paragraph with the starry night is a clue to the theological heart of *Nature*—a reflection of gratitude only possible in one aware of inhabiting an enchanted residence. This sentiment, available to all, is the condition for the journey of ascent.

USES OF NATURE: ON BEING LOST AND FOUND

The following four chapters in *Nature*—"Commodity," "Beauty," "Language," and "Discipline"—invite the reader to ascend the steps of various uses of nature. Commodity, by which Emerson means any advantage our senses owe to nature, is the lowest use. Yet "it is perfect in its kind, and is the only use of nature which all men apprehend" (12). In a Job-like litany, he provides a splendid catalogue of the "endless circulations of divine charity" and marvels at the useful arts, the latest products of the Industrial Revolution. But this use is a "mercenary benefit," a proximate good that must be referred onward.

In "Beauty" Emerson considers three aspects of beauty, whereby we refine our natural love or tastes. The first is the simple perception of the beauty of natural objects (15). Even in this evanescent aspect, it is only "the attentive eye" that sees beauty in each season and hour. The second "spiritual element," the divine beauty found in human virtue, perfects the first (16). In this doubly graced form, beauty endures for it is "the mark God sets upon virtue. Every natural action is graceful." By graced nature, the virtuous person is "in unison with her works" (17). Sympathy with such figures comes naturally: "the visible heavens and earth sympathize with Jesus" (17). To the perfection of moral virtue, we may add that of the intellect. The intellect depends on the mutual refinement of the intellect and appetite (18). In this way, "the beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (18). The "love of beauty is Taste . . . the creation of beauty is Art" (18). Each triune transcendental—beauty, goodness, and truth—serves as a herald of inward and eternal beauty (19).

Likewise, in "Language" nature is the vehicle of thought in a simple, double, and threefold degree. Words are first "signs of natural facts" (21). Second, we use natural facts as symbols of particular spiritual facts: "man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects" (21). Finally, "nature is the symbol of spirit" (20). The relation between mind and matter, the riddle posed by the Sphinx, is the "problem which has exercised the wonder and the study of every fine genius since the world began" (25). Having experimented with several metaphors for this relation—"garment," "scoriae," "mirror,"—Emerson concludes that these metaphors obscure more than they illuminate. In "The Poet," Emerson finds a more satisfactory linguistic metaphor, one that prefigures Wittgenstein's notion of meaning as use: "all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries . . . are, for conveyance, not as farms . . . are, for homestead" (463). How then, might the Book of Nature be read? "A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text" (25).

In the final use, discipline, we learn the end of nature—to provide an education for "the Understanding and the Reason" (here Emerson adapts

Coleridge's distinction, who had done likewise to Kant's) (26; see also Harvey 2013, 56–57; Keane 2005, 10–12, 83, 189–90). Each plays a crucial role. The understanding “adds, divides, combines, measures” and receives the lessons of nature. Reason perceives “the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.”

For the understanding, Nature is a discipline through habitual exercise and training to form “the common sense”—a sort of “half-sight” as we will see, but sight nonetheless (26). Nature's yes is yes, and no, no. Yet nature is also “thoroughly mediate,” receiving “the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode” (28). At once commanding and pliable, nature sets constraints and yet serves humanity's needs and purposes. Here, at last, in the realm of the understanding, Emerson addresses the role of the natural sciences. The first steps in various natural sciences—agriculture, astronomy, zoology, and physics—teach that each new gain in understanding ennobles and refines. Still, with each insight we are daunted by the inexhaustible Universe (27). Natural scientists are not likely to get bored! New knowledge gives rise to wonder about the known and unknown alike.

For Reason, all things in nature have moral and spiritual significance. The objects of the sciences take on new meaning. Every aspect of nature “shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments” (28). And here, Emerson explicitly treats religion: “Therefore is Nature ever the ally of Religion: lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment. Prophet and priest, David, Isaiah, Jesus, have drawn deeply from this source. This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made” (28). Nature has always inspired the religious sentiment. This is its public and universal function. All things “preach to us.” The attentive ear hears the “mute gospel” and perceives the end for which nature was made. In God, all of our worthy ends become means. All uses of nature are referred to a new end—the enjoyment of divine fellowship. To the religious sentiment, nature is an education in the “doctrine of Use” and the unity of Nature, which is nowhere as conspicuous as in right action (29). And thus, we come full circle. Our best teachers and ministers are those friends who supply us with a standard of excellence. God sends us “a real person to outgo our ideal. . . . We cannot choose but to love them” (31). Emerson suggests that through science nature continually perfects our understanding, through the religious sentiment our reason, and through friendship our imagination and highest ideals.¹⁴ Herein, a glimpse into “whence nature and whereto?”

FROM BLINDNESS TO SIGHT

The final three chapters of *Nature*—“Idealism,” “Spirit,” and “Prospects”—lead readers up the final summit to the song of the Orphic poet. Having

seen that all of nature conspires to educate humanity, in "Idealism" Emerson considers a "noble doubt" (32). Is the education of the human mind the final cause of the universe, and if so does physical nature actually exist? We might expect this transcendentalist to land decisively on the side of a stringent idealism. But Emerson loves to surprise. Nature is merely "ideal to me, so long as I cannot try the accuracy of my senses." Yet this is precisely what nature and culture facilitate. In collaboration with our reason, imagination, and affection, leaving intact our faith in certain natural laws, culture refines our *blind* faith in the senses and "unrenewed understanding" (33).

The effect of culture is to see that nature conspires with spirit to emancipate us. The poet and philosopher assist by helping us to perceive the spiritual or "real affinities between events (that is . . . ideal affinities, for those only are real)" (36). For them, nature is not fixed but fluid. And here we find a rare definition: "The Imagination [is] the use which the Reason makes of the material world" (34). The poet uses her imagination to the end of Beauty and the philosopher, Truth. Yet the two become one, two aspects of the same end. The hazard of the natural philosopher (scientist) is to think that once the formula is grasped matter might be discarded "like an outcast corpse" (37). Like these other forms of culture, ethics and religion, which Emerson calls "the practice of ideas or the introduction of ideas into life," suggest the dependence of nature on spirit (38). These two systems of human duties, ethics and religion, differ in that the former begins with humanity, the latter with God. The problem lies in their divorce. The most "ignorant sects" would have us "contemn the unsubstantial [visible and temporal] shows of the world" and seek instead "the [unseen and eternal] realities of religion" (38). The devotee—from the Manichean Augustine to the modern physicist—flouts nature.

Emerson rejects vulgar idealism, culture understood as an affront to nature: "I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love to it . . . I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest" (38). As ever, his aim is to illuminate, not only our alienation from, but our potential reconciliation with nature. The frivolous use of the ideal theory is burlesque. Nonetheless, at its best, the advantage of the ideal faith over the "popular faith" is that it is refined by speculative and practical Reason, "that is, [by] philosophy and virtue" (39). Idealism does not only see God in the world, "it sees the world in God." It sees human history in all its sublimity and beauty, as a vast painting by God, a work in progress, meant more for our contemplation than final judgment. Beholden to the ideal, it does not immerse itself in the trivial or microscopic means. This enables the soul to "see something more important in Christianity than the scandals of ecclesiastical history or the niceties of criticism; and . . . it accepts from God the phenomenon, as it finds it, as the pure and awful form of religion in the world." In idealism, the soul accepts this form of religion from God

because it is “a watcher more than a doer, and it is a doer only that it may the better watch.”

For all that, in “Spirit” we discover that the ideal theory only answers the first of three questions that nature puts to us: “What is matter? Whence is it? and Whereto?” (40). Idealism tells us that matter is a phenomenon, rather than a substance. It supplements the account of nature given by the principles of carpentry and chemistry. Yet if it denies the existence of matter, “it does not satisfy the demands of spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions to wander without end” (41). It serves, then, as “merely a useful introductory hypothesis, serving to apprise us of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world.” All of the foregoing uses, including idealism, have not yet brought us to consider Spirit. We have more to learn of this “brave lodging,” which endlessly exercises all our faculties (40).

The first tuition of Spirit is that nature is devout—quite “like the figure of Jesus” (40). “The happiest man,” Emerson states, as if adapting Aquinas’s eudemonism, “is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.” This is an intuition, summoned by returning to the questions: Whence and whereto, nature? Simply put, happiness consists in human and divine fellowship and activity, exemplified in the incarnation. “As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God” (41). It is no coincidence that at the heart of “Self-Reliance,” Emerson reiterates this organic unity: “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity” (269). Reception becomes participation. At high altitude, we perceive the Creator’s thoughts and become finite creators. The “Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us,” but “puts it forth through us” as a vine bears fruit through its branches. Virtue, we learn from Milton, is “the golden key, which opes the palace of eternity” (42). We “create [our] own world” through the continual purification or perfection of the soul.

The world and humanity proceed from the same spirit. Nature is a “remoter and inferior incarnation of God” (the soul a nearer and superior incarnation) (42). For Spirit, nature again becomes a fixed point, a divine law, a yes or no, by which we may gauge our departure. “As we degenerate” (and what is the anthropogenic crisis if not a form of degeneration?), “the contrast between us and our house is more evident. We are as much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds.” For us, the spring may as well be silent. Alienation from God and nature are of a piece. So, too, reconciliation.

At last, having journeyed some distance from the retrospective age with which we began, we arrive at “Prospects.” This final chapter lives up to the name, offering hopeful (for some, “starry-eyed”) revelations, visions of a new heaven and earth.¹⁵ Initially, the prospects do not look so good. Entering the “kingdom of man,” in which God will “go forth anew into

the creation,” is a matter of good sight and virtue, of seeing and acting well. But, again, we are warned of the “half-sight of science” and the “half-force” of religion which severely diminish our prospects and agency (45, 49, 47).

Science is half-blinded by an excessive attraction to the means, such that the end is lost sight of altogether. Particularly, “empirical science is apt to cloud the sight” (43). Even the most astute naturalist, wholly devoted to the truth, discovers that nature’s lessons cannot be learned through the understanding alone, “but [are] arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility” (43). It is a matter of grace, reception, and intuition as much as tuition, what Emerson later describes as “genius . . . the sound estate of every man” (57). Indeed, the basic problems to be solved—whence and whereto—are omitted by the naturalist. The empirical sciences and idealism share the same question (what is matter?). Each, in their own way, provides quite useful answers. But phenomena, observations, and precision only take us part way into the secrets of nature.

What’s worse, according to Emerson’s diagnosis, the malady of science afflicts human agency insofar as it “applies to nature, but half its force” (46). According to the traditional (historical and prophetic) song of the Orphic poet we are gods in ruins, royalty bereft of a throne. At this point, the plausible objections of environmental ethicists, scientists, and Emerson scholars, can no longer be held at bay. Are not humanity’s divine ambitions and force precisely what got us into this mess? Is not the poet’s final charge, to “Build, therefore, your own world,” the mantra of so-called industrial progress or environmental degradation? Did not Emerson officiate at the self-destructive wedding of the Industrial Revolution and colonial conquest, and become godfather of its ugly progeny American nationalism? (West 1989, 17; Walls 2003, 105). Did not *his* gospel create the new religion of American exceptionalism? (Richardson, 226). If theology is part of the problem, is not science our only hope? (For one answer, see Sideris 2015a). The final pages of *Nature* may serve as a response to such objections.

By the half-force of humanity, like the half-sight of science, Emerson means that most of us work on our world—that is, relate to nature and exercise power—by our understanding alone. Herein lies the problem. We master it “by penny-wisdom” (46). We have learned the lessons of commodity and extractive economies, the economical use of “fire, wind, water . . . ; steam, coal, chemical agriculture . . .” Alone, this amounts to a frugal and piecemeal resumption of power. It fails to address the question “to what end nature?,” and creates more problems than it solves. This form of mastery alienates us from nature, God, and neighbor—yes—but also from ourselves. “The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps,” he tell us, “is because man is disunited with himself” (47).

Unlike his essay “Experience,” *Nature* does not take us to the brink of hell and back out again (see Stout 2014). This is as dark as the essay gets.

Perhaps, Emerson suspects that each person contends with a sufficient dose of darkness. In the midst of a gloomy season, or ante-bellum America, why elaborate the starless night?

Regardless, darkness is not the point. The point is that “in the thick of darkness” there are never wanting glimmers of light—“examples of the action of man upon nature with his entire force—with reason as well as understanding” (46). By now we know that this is an ascetic, disciplined, use of force, honed by an aesthetic, moral, and religious sensibility continually refined in relation to nature. As luminous examples, Emerson suggests the history of Jesus Christ, religious and political revolutions, the abolition of the slave trade, the miracles of enthusiasm, and the wisdom of children. In 1859, a particularly dark season on account of white America, John Brown was for Emerson a piercing ray of light. Indeed, Emerson would end his literary career, his final lectures at Harvard in 1871, by recalling that “when we had to praise our own martyr, John Brown” (like having to praise the Sun for rising) a multitude of arguments, illustrations, and verses of old poetry appeared to have been written for the occasion.¹⁶ With the advocate of a good cause, all of nature joins in manifold witness. The problem, then, “of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul” (47). Love and perception, moral and intellectual virtue, perfect one another to this end.

Through the poets—a vocation, which for Emerson encompasses prophet, priest, bard, sage, seer, and sayer—“we learn to prefer imperfect theories, and sentences, which contain glimpses of truth, to digested systems which have no one valuable suggestion” (45). Herein, a gentle warning to readers who have made it thus far: they will be disappointed if they are expecting the latter. The “wise writer” (a modest name for Emerson’s ambitious aim), imparts hope not by answering all our questions, but by suggesting uncultivated regions of thought, new work and activity that remains to be done. And this provides a hint about how to read the songs of the Orphic poet.

As one begins to see with new eyes, to love with refined affection, then she may have ears to hear and arms outstretched to receive the benediction of the Orphic poet (the final paragraph of the essay). Like Virgil’s unburied dead, who “stretch forth their hands, through love of the farther shore” the poet begins (Kenneth Burke 1966, 894):

Nature is not fixed but fluid. . . . Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven. . . . Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours . . . a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar’s garret. Yet line for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs. . . . Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. . . . The advancing spirit . . . [shall] carry

with it the beauty it visits, and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen. The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation,—a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God,—he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight. (48–49)

To catalogue the Biblical allusions in this song—from Genesis to Revelation—would be pedantic, at least for biblically literate ears. Nonetheless, let me suggest some implications of this benediction and Emerson's theology in the essay, for our consideration of the Anthropocene before squarely treating the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

From the starlit city in the beginning to this kingdom of man, Emerson suggests with Augustine that the city of God is from everlasting to everlasting. Those who enjoy the wondrous restoration of sight, who build themselves a house, a world, and a heaven in which to dwell, inhabit this kingdom, however provisionally, here and now. This is paradise lost and regained. Our dominion is no less than that of Adam and Eve, Saint Francis, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, or John Brown. But neither is it more or otherwise. It is the power to use well and enjoy nature. It is not the stoic power of withdrawal. Neither is it the corrupt power of abuse, domination, conquest, or exploitation. The exhortation to “Build . . . your own world” is the antithesis of an endorsement for extractive economies, domination, and the consumeristic lifestyles that fuel them. It is rather of a piece with the ascetic Pauline counsel (borrowed nearly *verbatim*) to be transformed by the renewing of your mind rather than conform to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2). This is far from an endorsement then of the Anthropocene as an end in itself, an opportunity for humans to exercise unrestrained power over creation. The imperative requires not that we conform the world to our own image (or half-blind status quo), but that we be conformed to our highest ideals. A revolution, in the social, political, economic, and natural realms, is bound to follow this Pentecost of the religious sentiment. The Orphic poet's song, rather than a mere starry-eyed ballad, serves as a final canto meant to inspire the virtues of faith, love, and hope, needed to pursue the beatific vision.

THESE THREE REMAIN

Recall, in the “Divinity Address,” having taken the graduates up the north face of the summit, Emerson declares that “By it [the religious sentiment], is the universe made safe and habitable, not by science or power” (78). I have suggested that the virtues of faith, hope, and love—traditionally theological virtues—are crucial for this ascent, and for perfecting the practices of science and religion today. The object of these intellectual and moral virtues, for Emerson, is not precisely the Trinity of Thomas Aquinas or

other classical theologians, but the virtues are no less triune, and no less regard the hypostatic union of the spiritual and material, the ideal and the real. Indeed, for Emerson there is a sense in which these virtues are every bit as much a matter of grace, of participatory reception—what he calls “genius”—as Aquinas’s infused version. They feature throughout *Nature*, perfecting the practices of science and religion at every step. Emerson returns to these themes and virtues in his late essay “Worship.” Let us consider each virtue in turn.

Nature ends where it begins, in faith and its attendant wonder. In the beginning, Emerson hints that in the woods we invariably return to reason and faith. The two are a pair. Not again, until “Idealism,” “Spirit,” and “Prospects,” do faith and reason reappear. Here and in “Worship,” Emerson emphasizes that faith is simply a feature of human nature. “We are born believing” (1056). If critics found *Nature* too starry-eyed, they complained that “Fate,” “Power,” and “Wealth”—the essays preceding “Worship” in *The Conduct of Life*—gave “too much line to the evil spirit of the times,” buttressing arguments for atheism (1055). Emerson responds, “I have no infirmity of faith. . . . If the Divine Providence has hid from men neither disease nor deformity nor corrupt society, but has stated itself out in passions, in war . . . in hunger and need, in tyrannies—let us not be so nice that we cannot write these facts down coarsely as they stand.” Faith must squarely face and survive such facts. The good soul, Emerson wagers, may give welcome to a healthy skepticism, confident that the “doctrine of Faith” rests at the “center of Nature.”

Emerson’s was not a naïve faith. By 1860, it had become readily apparent that “we live in a transition period” (1058). The “old faiths” had succumbed to an untimely death, the fatal divorce of religion and morality, and the recent culture had come to be defined by natural science. Still, he did not expect the latter to replace the former. Emerson summarizes the utter corruption of antebellum religion thus: “Here are know-nothing religions, or churches that proscribe intellect; . . . slave-holding and slave-trading religions; and, even in the decent populations, idolatries wherein the whiteness of the ritual covers scarlet indulgence” (1058). The cities have become godless, materialized—inhabited not by people, but by walking appetites.

The problem is a matter of faith. Faith is not only a feature of human nature, the virtue of faith refines belief. Among the idolatrous, that is, white religions, “There is no faith in the intellectual, none in the moral universe. There is faith in chemistry, in meat and wine, in wealth, in machinery, in the steam-engine, galvanic battery . . . in public opinion, but not in divine causes” (1059). This passage echoes those in *Nature* about humanity’s half-force. There we learned that idealism, at its best, weds a childlike faith in nature with the philosopher’s and poet’s faith in its appearance as a phenomenon. The advantage of this faith over the “popular faith” is

precisely its alignment with virtue (39). The loss of true faith, equally a loss of genius, is accompanied by an “acceptance of the lucrative [rather than the moral] standard” (1063).

The virtue of faith, for Emerson, perfects the natural sciences and religion by revealing their affinity and directing practitioners to their moral and spiritual end. The discoveries of the natural sciences are of a piece, he thinks, with a “secreter gravitation” of the religious sentiment and are “predetermined to moral issues” (1064). True “religion or worship is the attitude of those who see this unity” (1065). With respect to natural science, it would be near-sighted “to limit our faith in laws to those of gravity, of chemistry, of botany, and so forth.” *Nature* is meant to inspire the virtue of faith, quintessentially about perfecting one’s vision.

The practices of true religion perfect the practices of the natural sciences, even as the sciences inform a mature faith. The religion that Emerson expects to “guide and fulfil the present and coming ages” in “Worship” “must be intellectual. The scientific mind must have a faith which is science” (1076). What sort of science? He prophesies, in the final paragraph of the essay, “There will be a new church founded on moral science.” Its practitioners will learn that the glory of human beings lies in faith, humility, and love. This new church, more likely to inspire worship in the woods than in steeples or cities, “shall send man home to his central solitude.” The essay ends, where *Nature* begins and ends, in faith and sublime wonder.

Hope, Emerson does not so much write about as seek to inspire in his readers. Recall, in *Nature*, the wise writer dispenses hope by suggesting new regions of activity, new horizons of thought and action. “An infinite hope” is the greatest gift that genius bestows (1972, 84). Following Aristotle and Aquinas, for Emerson virtuous activity is part and parcel of *eudaimonia*; it is the means and the end. As we saw in *Nature*, so too in “Worship,” the education or discipline of humanity in divine fellowship is the end of nature. Both essays provide hope, not by painting a sanguine portrait of future events, but by pointing out new domains for work, and suggesting that virtuous activity is the end—the only key to heaven, in this life or another.

Hope guards against the vices of presumption and despair. These may well be the chief temptations of the Anthropocene—the presumption that we can make the world habitable by science or power alone, or despair that the world will become utterly uninhabitable. The virtue of hope perfects practitioners of science and religion, by directing their sight, activity, and goals to their final end and inspiring the courage needed to “follow [love] utterly” along the way (Emerson 2006, 9: 91).

The virtue of love has been the most conspicuous aspect of the journey of ascent, from the love of immortal to mortal beauty, from the sublimely beautiful stars, to Emerson’s childlike love of nature and friends. I will not rehearse its ubiquity in *Nature*. It might be sufficient to say that Emerson

was a student of the apostle Paul before he was an apostle of Edmund Burke, Plato, Coleridge, or Wordsworth. He knew that love is all in all, that faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Thus, from *Nature* to “Worship” we find the refrain, “The superiority that has no superior; [the cure of blindness]; the redeemer and instructor of souls, as it is their primal essence, is love” (1064). Absent love, all our activities and causes—scientific, religious, environmental, or otherwise—are so much dross. Having nearly recited his litany against economical use in *Nature*, Emerson concludes his essay “Art” with the following line: “When science is learned in love, and its powers are wielded by love, they will appear the supplements and continuations of the material creation” (440). Love is the divine law.

GRACE WILL LEAD US HOME

In light of Emerson’s *Nature*, the Anthropocene appears a brilliantly self-conscious, that is, modern name for a timeless truth of human history, namely, that for better and for worse humanity and Nature continually mold and make one another. Emerson was well attuned to the promises and perils that would accompany the professionalization of science and technology already well under way in the nineteenth century. Modern scientific practice, and conceptions of modern science, are *both* sources of habits and dispositions toward nature. Some of these can have noxious effects. Emerson knows that to some extent natural scientists must have a disenchanting attitude toward nature. After all, this posture enables nature to be (to some degree) dissected and known, predicted and controlled. Yet when directed by the lucrative rather than the moral standard, as Emerson prophesied, this attitude has had various (and obvious) unwelcome effects. Unaccompanied by the religious sentiment or the virtues of faith, hope, and love that perfect the scientist as a member of various moral communities, this attitude threatens to do more harm than good, to impede rather than enhance human flourishing and common goods. Science and technology may help make the world provisionally livable; they may orient us to many wondrous nooks and crannies of the Universe we inhabit. Alone, they do not make it safe or habitable.

Like his fellow Transcendentalists, Emerson enthusiastically welcomes the insights of modern science while resisting the view that our knowledge of or relation to nature is subsumed by these practices, that there is in the world no grace, no sacred value. The famous hymn, “Faith’s Review and Expectation” now known by its first line, “Amazing Grace,” is a poem written by the Anglican priest John Newton in 1772. Newton spent several years as a slave trader (and enslaved in Africa), even after his initial conversion to Christianity, and only later became an activist for the abolition of the slave trade. His is a story of slow and gradual restoration of sight, of

multiple conversions from the idolatrous, white, slave-trading religions to a true religion that weds faith, hope, and love. I have hinted throughout that there are resonances between the modest re-enchantment that Emerson's religious sentiment provides and this hymn. Indeed, Emerson suggests that the "Grace of God"—which is nearly identical for him with genius, virtue, and "*royal* reason"—simply is "the method of nature" (122). The exultant final verse of the hymn, often sung today ["When we've been there ten thousand years . . ."], was anonymously added in 1829. The original version, more sobering and fitting in light of anthropogenic crises, ended with the following stanza:

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who call'd me here below,
Will be forever mine.

It may as well be a folk version of the final stanza of Emerson's Orphic poet. For the blind person who is "gradually restored to perfect sight" is not naive about impending crises. She has rather cultivated the virtues of temperance, humility, courage, justice, faith, hope, and love, among a host of others, necessary for agents who would make a home of such a world.

There are several ways to recommend a cause: point to exemplars, especially martyrs, willing to die for it; make persuasive arguments; or (among others) use the process of dialectical transcendence, to transform the way we see and act—and so inspire faith, hope, and love (Kenneth Burke 1966, 880–81). *Nature*, the "Divinity Address," and "Worship" use all three but are mainly instances of the third. Environmentalists may not be particularly enamored with this form of theological activism, but it is not clear that there is a better path for our collective transformation. The religious sentiment does not make the world safe and habitable by giving us power to control and dominate, by immunizing us from dangers, toils, and snares, but by empowering us to live well, even die well, in their midst.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Emerson quotations throughout this essay are from the following source: Emerson (1983). Within a paragraph, all citations are the same as the previous page number unless otherwise noted.

2. For two essays that commend this ostensible turn to virtue in environmental ethics see Jenkins (2016) and Hulme (2014); see also Sandler and Cafaro (2005) and Lane (2013). The interest in religion and virtue in environmental ethics is not new. As Lynn White famously put it, "since the roots of our [environmental] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious whether we call it that or not" (1967, 1207). For recent works that look to religious communities and the virtues of hope and love, see Ghosh (2016), Wirzba (2017), and Wendell Berry's work which prefigures both of these trends, especially Berry (2015a,b). Indeed, figures like Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Wendell Berry, and Annie Dillard challenge the idea of any such "turn" to virtue and religion.

3. The inception of the "Anthropocene" and its use as a geological term are disputed. Paul Crutzen, who helped coin the term, defines it as the "human-dominated geological epoch

supplementing the Holocene,” an epoch in which human beings have become “a major environmental force” (2012, 23). This influence of human beings on the environment was recognized as early as 1873 by the Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani, who coined the term “Anthropozoic.” Some trace its inception to the Industrial Revolution, while others such as William Ruddiman trace its origins to the beginning of deforestation and agriculture eight thousand years ago, and still others as far back as fifteen thousand years (Crutzen 2002, 415; Ruddiman 2013, 45–68). Some, like Clive Hamilton, insist that the Anthropocene marks a dramatic departure from what has gone before. He claims that those who see it “as no more than a development of what they already know, obscur[e] and deflat[e] its profound significance” (Hamilton 2016; Ruder 2018). Others, such as Erle Ellis and Andrew M. Bauer, argue that the “strident debate about the Anthropocene’s chronological boundaries arises because its periodization forces an arbitrary break in what is a long-enduring process of human alterations of environments” (Bauer and Ellis 2018). They claim that this “Anthropocene divide” obscures rather than clarifies understandings of human–environmental relationships. My aim here is not to settle disputes about the precise origin and nature of the Anthropocene, nor need I take a side in this dispute about continuity and discontinuity in order to signal Emerson’s contribution. It is enough to show what these various accounts share in common, namely that human beings have become what Dipesh Chakrabarti calls a “geophysical force” in the Earth system.

Emerson already provides, in the nineteenth century, the kind of “new” theological and philosophical anthropology that Hamilton thinks we need in order to face the fact of human agency, while relinquishing the idea that we can control the planet—“a philosophy by which we might use our power responsibly and find a way to live on a defiant Earth” (Hamilton 2016). Emerson, who could not have foreseen the full extent of humanity’s geophysical force, nonetheless helps us to see the reciprocal relation between humanity and nature, and to consider the ways that human beings profoundly shape and are in turn shaped by the natural world. Recent theorists have used the term “niche construction” to describe this reciprocal relationship or “the modification by organisms of the functional relationships between themselves and their environment” (Erle 2016; Fuentes 2017). Ecotheologian Thomas Berry describes the possibility of a mutually enhancing relationship between human beings and the Earth by naming this the “ecozoic” era (eco from the Greek term *oikos* meaning home and zoic from the Greek term *zoikos* pertaining to living beings) (1990).

4. Emerson’s socio-practical view of modern natural science (“natural philosophy”) and religion challenges the prominent conflict myth and territory metaphors used to depict the relation between science and religion. See Barbour 2000; Harrison 2015.

5. The “Divinity Address” is a third important text on this theme. For my consideration of this address, see Dumler-Winckler (2015; 2017).

6. For a similar argument, see Jonathan Lear’s analogy between the Crow people and climate change today (2008).

7. I keep Emerson’s gendered language (“man”) throughout. There is much to be said about Emerson’s views of women. Here, the suggestion that, borrowing Cornel West’s term “mild racist,” we could describe the early Emerson as a “mild misogynist” will have to suffice (West 1989, 28).

8. The map metaphor has a long controversial history. I do not take Emerson’s use of this metaphor to signal an affinity with the correspondence theories of language or truth with which it is often associated. Neither does my use of the metaphor signal a vulgar relativist or constructivist epistemology. Indeed, the map metaphor is helpful insofar as it is not beholden to realist and anti-realist epistemological concerns that animate defenders and detractors of correspondence theories in the first place.

9. William Whewell famously coined the term “scientist” in 1833. Many influential scientists rejected it, preferring to think of their work as part of broader philosophical, theological, and moral concerns (Walls 2003, 62–63).

10. There are interesting parallels between debates in Augustine scholarship about the *uti/frui* (use/enjoyment) distinction and debates in Emerson scholarship about his account of “use” with respect to natural goods, and the problem of instrumentalization. For an overview of debates in Augustine studies, see O’Connor (1983); Stewart-Kroeker (2014).

11. Feminists have both criticized and reclaimed the traditional association between nature and the feminine. Though Emerson does not appear to be self-conscious about the gendered connotations, his disposition is one of piety rather than denigration.

12. See Jeffrey Stout's excellent treatment of piety as a democratic virtue, specifically in Emerson (Stout 2004).

13. See Laura Walls's excellent treatment of science, poetry, and religion in Emerson's work. My interpretation differs, however. In her view, Emerson thinks that nature is "essentially dead" (Walls 2003, 99). His defining move, exemplified in the "transparent eye-ball. . . is to reinstate the Cartesian divide between mind and matter" (99). I rather take this to be one dialectical moment, one side of the subject/object divide meant to be overcome through nature. I do not (as does Walls) think that it signals a strictly Cartesian or Kantian epistemology (25–26, 31, 99–100, 195).

14. Walls (2003). Walls argues that, early on, Emerson reversed the classical ordering that viewed theology as the queen of the sciences, by making religion and theology answer to science as a higher authority. I am suggesting that for Emerson, at least in *Nature* (though I think this remains true even in his later work), science (*including* theology—divine science—and poetry, the "gai science") is invaluable, but nonetheless requires the religious sentiment, and virtues of faith, hope, and love, for its perfection.

15. See Kenneth Burke's wonderful essay on *Nature*, especially his important distinction between catharsis and transcendentalism as therapy (Burke 1966, 885 ff.).

16. Emerson did not publish these lectures himself. Rick Spaulding and Maurice York published this version, having plumbed Emerson's lecture notes, outlines, and student notes (Emerson 2008).

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