

# On Emerson's Concept of Beauty

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What is "beauty"? To some, perhaps unspoiled wilderness such as the Sierra Nevada Mountains rising from the desert floor recalls the essence of beauty. Others may perceive man's enhancement of nature through art as beauty. The Greeks referred to beauty as "A universal order or harmony of parts" in the word, "κόσμος," (cosmos.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson thought profoundly about the concept of Beauty, and in fact, devoted a whole chapter to its clarification in his first book, Nature, written in 1836. In this chapter entitled, "Beauty," Emerson unveils his threefold aspects of beauty, including 1) the simple perception of natural forms, 2) the spiritual element essential to its perfection and 3) beauty as an object of the intellect. In this first book, Nature, the young 33 year old Emerson cannot contain his idealistic perception of life as represented in "Beauty." But 24 years later an older, wiser Emerson provides development in his concept of beauty in his essay, "Fate," included in his last major book, The Conduct of Life (1860.) Though Emerson does not lose his idealism, he reflects expanded insight and reflection through his examination of the "odious facts" in nature and life generally.

Thus, it is the intention of this paper to acquaint the reader with Emerson's basic concept of beauty as it develops through youth to maturity, in comparing the two essays, "Beauty," from the book, Nature, (1836) to his essay, "Fate," from his book, The Conduct of Life (1860.) Whereas in "Beauty" beauty is pervasive; in "Fate" beauty must include the "odious facts."

Emerson separates beauty into three intertwining, distinct parts in the essay, "Beauty." They include -- simple perception, spiritual elements, and beauty as an object of the intellect. "Simple perception" refers to forms which are a delight in themselves. For example, frost rimmed flowers or a shimmering lake at sunset. Emerson believes these sights to be refreshment to one's soul. He states, "The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees sky and the woods, and is a man again." However wonderful beauty can be at this level, it is, though, the least of beauty according to Emerson. This is because he feels that these "shows of day ... if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality." So, the second level of beauty must go beyond what the eye merely perceives.

"Spiritual elements" refer to beauty found in the combination of nature and human will. Spiritual elements are "essential to its (beauty) perfection." Emerson questions whether man can be separated from nature, referring to the impact of men like Columbus, Jesus, Winkelreid, and other "heroes." For example, he asks what beauty and significance there would be in Lewis and Clark's expeditions without man there perceiving nature. Thus, does beauty exist

without the eye there to interact with it?

"Beauty as an object of the intellect" refers to the process of new thought (creation) born out of man's mind's interaction with nature. The result of this process is art. Emerson states, "The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation." "The creation of beauty is art." He also states, "Art is nature passed through the alembic of man." Through the mind's interaction with nature, the mystery of humanity receives some light, helping man to better understand it. The works of nature are innumerable and different, but their expressions are similar. For example, a leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape and so on, all impress the mind. But, what is common to all of them is that, "perfectness and harmony equals beauty," according to Emerson. Because these two elements, "perfectness" and "harmony" exist in all of nature, they are man's keys to perceiving the essence of nature.

According to Emerson, man can learn from this process of creation of beauty through nature (simple perception), the eye (spiritual elements) and the soul (intellect, creation) working together. Therefore, his concept of beauty can be summarized into the act of the eye perceiving nature utilizing the soul, the eye, and nature. According to Emerson, all of us can be active in this process -- beauty -- giving us pleasure, a spiritual dimension, and intellectual insight because of our eyes. Eyes are the key instruments through which all this can occur since they integrate our thoughts, observations, and the actual forms of nature into an entirety.

Emerson's references to beauty in his essay, "Fate," show many differences from his earlier essay, "Beauty," with one exception. This common theme concerns his insistence that everything has the potential to be beautiful. Both essays reflect this thought. In "Beauty" he states, "Even the corpse has its own beauty." He echoes this in "Fate," where he says, "I do not wonder at a snowflake ... but at the necessity of beauty under which the universe lies; that all is and must be pictorial ..." He continues, "... the indwelling necessity plants the rose of beauty on the brow of chaos, and discloses the central intention of Nature to be harmony and joy." Emerson is able to see beauty in everything because he sees nature as arising from "the organism of the eye" integrating with the soul (thought.) These work to find the universal elements -- perfectness and harmony.

One of the differences between Emerson's concept of beauty in "Beauty," compared to his concept of beauty in "Fate," is that he does not seem to take delight in the simpler appreciation of beauty as he did before. He focuses too heavily on the mental experience of nature in his later essay. To him, everything has equal beauty because he no longer only delights himself with the form (the snowflake, landscape ...) but rather with the perfection and harmony of that form. Perhaps, his thinking can be compared to the scientist who finds greater joy in the chemicals and compounds he uses rather than the result of his experiment. Emerson says that the form shouldn't matter since everything is derived from one source, the same elements. He states, "There is no need for foolish amateurs to fetch me to admire a garden of flowers ... How idle to choose a random sparkle here or there, when the indwelling necessity plants the rose of beauty..." This is quite a contrast to his statement in "Beauty." There he states, "Nature satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness..." He continues by giving

examples of how he has watched sunrises from daybreak, snow-lined trees in winter, and so on -- all reflecting the younger Emerson's delight in the simple perception of beauty. The older Emerson has greatly expanded his first perceptions of beauty so that the spiritual and intellectual concepts of beauty have a much greater influence on his perception.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Emerson's essays, "Beauty" and "Fate," is the way in which he confronts the existence of what he refers to as the "odious facts." These "odious facts" are the negative circumstances of life and nature. He states, "... the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman..." In "Beauty," Emerson does not even mention "odious facts." The only reference of any sort to them occurs in his analogy of how great men died in their settings creating beauty through their heroic deaths. But, even death does not seem "odious" in this sense. For example, Emerson cites Sir Henry Vane's death at the Towerhill. He states, "When Sir Henry Vane was dragged up the Towerhill... one of the multitude cried out to him, "You never sat on so glorious a seat." The context (setting in nature) integrated with Vane's death (an odious fact) to create beauty in that death. In "Beauty," Emerson seems to have little realistic thought as to how to cope with the "odious facts." He views them rather idealistically, as if he is hoping they do not exist by ignoring their existence.

However, in "Fate," Emerson confronts the "odious facts" of nature as he wrestles with them throughout his essay. He begins by describing how ruthless nature can be. He states, "Nature is no sentimentalist. It does not cosset or pamper us... The diseases, the elements, fortune, gravity, lightning, respect no persons." He continues by describing how these "odious facts" permeate our lives. He gives the following example: "You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity..." He is underscoring the fact that "odious facts" exist and that every person faces them. However, as he continues his essay, Emerson describes how these "odious facts" are not as negative as they may appear. They are actually challenges and devices which stimulate man's growth. He says, "All are made of one piece; why should we fear to be crushed by savage elements, we who are made up of the same elements?" He is almost asking the question, why should we fear ourselves?

An example Emerson provides to illustrate how man can grow from confrontation with the "odious facts" is seen in the Jews. He states, "the sufferance which is the badge of the Jew, has made him, in these days, the rulers of the rulers of the earth." He continues, "... if calamities, oppositions, and weights are wings and means, we are reconciled."

One other difference between the two essays is Emerson's emphasis on man's potential to be god in "Fate," and the lack of that emphasis in "Beauty." The idea that man can reach for the top of the pedestal, use his ability to off-set limitations, weaknesses, natural hazards and elements, to strive for the perfection and harmony in everything, Emerson believes, can make him god-like. This expansion of his ideas from "Beauty," takes man beyond the mere integration of "simple perception," "spiritual elements," and "beauty as an object of the intellect." The essence of everything -- its perfection and harmony -- is the unity which contains the divinity, according to Emerson. By perceiving the beauty in all circumstances and nature, we become gods. He states, "To off-set the drag of temperment and

race, learn this lesson ... by the cunning co-presence of two elements (perfection and harmony) which is throughout nature, whatever lames or paralyzes you draws you in with it the divinity ... When a god wishes to ride, any chip or pebble will bud and shoot out winged feet and serve him for a horse." Basically, Emerson believes the potential is there for everyone to expand towards divinity if we synthesize the concept of beauty in its fullness into our lives.

In conclusion, through the comparison of Emerson's concept of beauty in his essays, "Beauty," and "Fate," we can see an expansion of his earlier idealism as he develops a philosophy of increased depth and realism. Though he had experienced some of the most "odious" of facts prior to the publication of Nature in 1836, with the deaths of his father (1811), wife, two brothers, and firstborn son (between 1831-1836) he managed to convey such wonder and enthusiasm in his first book. It is difficult for one to escape his influence of finding such beauty in all. However, 24 years later, the publication, The Conduct of Life reflects the older, mature Emerson reflecting on his life. Even in spite of his recognition and understanding of the "odious facts" he does not let go of his idealism, but develops the concept of how all aspects of beauty can eventually lead man into a higher state of being. Thus, we may conclude that his life was one of progress.

## REFERENCES

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