

# WHAT THE MIRROR SEES: REFLECTION AND WHOLENESS IN EMERSON AND HEIDEGGER

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This essay compares several of the basic ideas in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendental poetry and philosophy (knowledge through intuition, renunciation of the will to power, artistic creation as a natural process) with some fundamental concepts of Martin Heidegger's Existential philosophy (letting-be, reflection), suggesting a historical—though not necessarily causal—continuity between the two. The fact that both of them advocate a more passive, or *receptive*, attitude for the human being and conceive of thought as a *devout response* to existence indicates that they form part of the same alternative Romantic current in Occidental culture that encourages a return for western thinking to a holistic paradigm.

**Key Words:** Emerson, Heidegger, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Reflection, Holistic.

## *La Mirada del Espejo: Reflexión y Totalidad en Emerson y Heidegger*

En este ensayo se comparan algunas de las ideas fundamentales expuestas en la filosofía y poesía Trascendental de Ralph Waldo Emerson (conocimiento intuitivo, renuncia a la voluntad de poder, la creación artística como proceso natural) con algunos de los conceptos básicos de la filosofía Existencial de Martín Heidegger (*sein lassen*, *Besinnung*) sugiriéndose una continuidad histórica —aunque no necesariamente causal— entre ambos. El hecho de que estos dos autores aboguen por una actitud más pasiva o *receptiva* por parte del ser humano y de que conciban el pensamiento como una *respuesta reverente* ante la existencia apunta a que ambos puedan ser partícipes de la misma corriente romántica que en la cultura occidental acabó por promover el desarrollo de una cosmovisión holista e integral.

**Palabras clave:** Emerson, Heidegger, Romanticismo, Transcendentalismo, Reflexión, Holista.

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He [the painter] should know that landscape has beauty for his eye because it expresses a thought which to him is good, and this because the same power which sees through his eyes is seen in that spectacle

Ralph Waldo Emerson

I would like to begin this essay by getting off the subject. Before I talk about reflection as a strategy for wholeness, I'd like to digress, by way of introduction, and make a few observations on the phenomenon of forgetfulness as it seems to be encroaching on our discipline. My starting-point for this initial detour is a profound rumination on the poetry of Paul Celan (see López Gavilán). In this discussion, the author carefully elucidates Celan's poetic re-vision of his own experience of the Nazi holocaust, and at the same time points out Hans-Georg Gadamer's subtle and apparently selective blindness to the painful truths about human nature that Celan is trying to remind us to remember. He also argues that this kind of blindness, which serves conveniently to relegate so many important events and their deepest causes to oblivion, seems to be one of the inherent traits of modern democratic societies, a trait that facilitates mass manipulation.

Because once we have forgotten, we need not suffer guilt, nor entertain remorse, nor feel responsibility.

Of course, it goes without saying that the technological global village not only works toward eradicating many forms of cultural, not to mention biological diversity, but also offers us innumerable opportunities to forget. The commercial interests that control the mass media coerce us into a more or less constant state of nervous acquisitiveness. Is it a coincidence that eroticism and pornography form such an important component of the new webs of mass communication? One of the functions of control is to keep us in a perpetual state of desire, always wanting more. We must be kept uneasy, unreflective, constantly vulnerable to the novel appeal of the most recently created objects of consumption.

With so many trivial attractions clamoring for our attention, we have no time left in our lives to remember what is important and therefore, just possibly, to recognize how we are being controlled and to

comprehend the violence to nature and humanity that those in power too often perpetrate with casual impunity.

But then, whose responsibility is it to remember? Or at least, to remember for all the rest of us who are drowning in oblivion?

As Paul Celan realized, remembrance is, first and foremost, the responsibility of the artist. And this kind of remembering also entails a serious questioning of the direction that our “culture” is taking—especially nowadays, when culture itself is being turned into a virtually mindless process of “consumption”. But as López Gavilán indicates, it is precisely this responsibility to remember, with its concomitant resistance to the pressures to conform, that takes us back to the mainstream of American literature. This is what Melville perceived in Hawthorne’s almost obsessive remembrances of the American past, and the pressure it exerts on the present. This is what, in that famous passage from a letter to Hawthorne, Melville recognized as Hawthorne’s greatest strength as an artist:

He says NO! in thunder; but the devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say no,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, unencumbered travellers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego. (qtd. in López Gavilán: 294)

Maybe this is a test we should apply to our assessment of literary works—if, that is, we happen to believe that it is still a duty of academics to assess the value of any work that claims to deserve our attention. But this thought brings me round to what is really on my mind. What about *our* duties and responsibilities? Don’t we also, as servants of works of art, share the responsibility to remember, and therefore as well, when necessary, the responsibility to say **NO!** (if not in thunder, at least in the more timid, secondary strains of, say, an Oven Bird)?

It seems to me that we are also being co-opted into the cycle of forgetfulness, that we—with our own particular hunger for the new—are becoming the rubber-stampers, the ultimate conformists, the Yes-men (and women) of the academic industry. After all, haven’t critical

theories themselves practically become objects of consumption, that we buy today—in order to publish our “new research”—and then cast into the wastebin of oblivion tomorrow? (Andrew Delbanco [1999] provides an entertaining and provocative discussion of this process and its erosive effects.)

It might be beneficial, or at least suggestive, to compare this vision of what our discipline is becoming with one of Emerson’s comments on the character of the American Scholar as he understood it. “[I]t becomes him,” Emerson wrote,

to feel all confidence in himself, and to defer never to the popular cry. He and only he knows the world. The world at any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down. The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy. Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom. (1989b: 939)

But is it really worth the trouble to take someone like Emerson seriously? Is it really valid to consider that his words, rather than being a mere “object of study”, may contain ideas that are pertinent to our lives, that provide models of thought and behavior that may be useful to assimilate, and to put into practice?

The arguments that follow should be construed as an attempt to give an answer to those questions.

### *Cookie-cutter syndrome*

Many many years ago, back in the forgettable past—1984—the feminist critic Wendy Martin committed the following judgment to print:

In his essays, Emerson articulates alternative points of view, arguing first one side, then the other. His experience is circular, but it is quite unlike Dickinson’s circumferential vision.

Emerson returns where he began, contemplating the circuit between subject and object, but, unlike Dickinson, he does not experience himself as coexisting with the universe. [. . .] For him, the universe is the bride, the consciousness is the groom, and the two are never congruent. Emerson's philosophical system, then, repeats the traditional paradigm of male mind subduing female matter [. . .]. Emerson and Dickinson represent two modes of consciousness, the linear and the holistic. (121–2)

Unfortunately, far from the kind of precision and clarity that good criticism should provide, these phrases offer us only fuzzy thinking. Emerson doesn't experience himself as *coexisting* with the universe? One wonders if she knows what "coexisting" means (though she surely must), not to mention that problematic word, "congruent". Is she suggesting, first of all, that brides and grooms don't correspond, or agree, and secondly, that therefore consciousness (in Emerson's view) is not harmonious with the universe? Certainly, one wonders if she has really read Emerson's work at all, or indeed, if she's even listening to what she herself is saying.

It is, admittedly, a very hard task to think about thinkers as subtle and deep as Emerson and Dickinson. In fact, it requires a corresponding subtlety and depth. But isn't that what we're supposed to strive for? Shouldn't we, of all people, make every effort we can to cultivate those elusive qualities?

Let me say right now that it's not my intention to bash Wendy Martin, nor to enter into any divisive us–against–them polemics. I would like to suggest, though, that she suffers an unfortunate myopia as a result of her over–dependence on a single critical lens. This is what I take some pleasure in thinking of as "the cookie–cutter syndrome". Literature is the amorphous dough; critical theory becomes the arbitrary instrument we use to cut it into the shape we'd like it to be.

Martin goes on to say that Dickinson struggled "with complex problems such as the artificial distinction between subject and object that characterizes patriarchal modes of perception [. . .]" (123). And this seems almost accurate. Except that her blind–spot keeps her from seeing

the point: Emerson did, too. His writing was a constant attempt to grapple with that problem, to reformulate our concept of the relation between subject and object, or mind and world, which implies, of course, a radical reformulation of our concept of the self.

Still, in spite of her general dimness of vision, Martin almost seems to glimpse that fact:

Emerson wrote that it was the “poet who re–attaches things to nature and the Whole.” This imaginative leap is difficult if constrained by the burden of the socially constructed self. As Emerson understood, memory is, in part, a form of selective consciousness that enables the individual to maintain a coherent sense of self. But the ego, memory, with its arbitrary divisions of past and present, falsifies experience by interfering with the perception of the moment. [. . .] Arbitrary categories of past, present and future are mechanical divisions that serve the public presentation of self, schedules for the production of goods, but not truths of the the psyche or nature. (124–5)

Now this is an interesting observation. But how does it fit in with what she had previously called Emerson’s “linear mode of consciousness”? Well, it simply doesn’t. I leave it to the reader to contemplate whether her claims about Emerson’s so–called “patriarchal mode of perception” are not in themselves a contradiction of the supposedly opposite mode of perception that she believes she is defending.

### *The passive Master*

We can never get to the essence of a serious work of art, or a complex way of thinking, if we’ve already decided beforehand what they are. It’s like trying to do neurosurgery with a screwdriver and a pick. The subject is too delicate. The instruments themselves would kill the patient. Emerson saw this very well. As he says in “Self–Reliance”: “Leave your theory as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee” (960).

As a matter of fact, much of his poetry seems to have been written to convey this kind of thinking. Again and again he tells us that we need to leave our pre–conceptions behind and learn how to *open our-*

*selves* to what is there. In “Each and All”, for example, the moment he stops *pursuing* beauty, trying to control or to possess it, then, paradoxically, the beauty is his:

Again I saw, again I heard,  
The rolling river, the morning bird,—  
Beauty through my senses stole;  
I yielded myself to the perfect Whole. (ll. 48–51)

True, his previous aggressive attitude toward nature had alienated him from it. But we must not miss the value of that final verb. In his act of “yielding” the world *regains* its beauty for his newly-receptive senses. In this poem we are already close to the complicated psychology of renunciation that characterizes Dickinson’s life and work. Emerson finds beauty as soon as he stops searching for it. In other words, you have what you want when you let it go. Dickinson, even more acutely, refuses to possess, and delights in the power of her consequent emptiness.

In “The Problem,” looking forward directly to Martin Heidegger’s deep consideration of the nexus between *physis* and *poiēsis* (1977: 10–12), Emerson reflects on the relatedness of natural processes and human creative processes, suggesting that they both spring from the same source—the flow of unconscious energies that inform the world:

These temples grew as grows the grass;  
Art might obey, but not surpass.  
The passive Master lent his hand  
To the vast soul that o’er him planned;  
And the same power that reared the shrine,  
Bestrode the tribes that knelt within. (ll. 45–50)

It may not be great poetry, but it successfully makes a point. We only need to change a few terms here to see that Emerson’s “passive Master” who lends his hand to a greater power in the creation of religious art is not that different from Heidegger’s poet, who, in obedience to “the soundless voice of Being”, brings language out of the silence and “names what is holy” (1949: 358, 360).

These complex themes—the recognition that beauty is a function

of transience and can therefore only be possessed by letting it go (that is, by letting it be what it is in its essential evanescence), the recognition that the deepest form of creativity lies in a wise obedience to powers that transcend the individual will (or consciousness)—these themes reach their climax in “The Rhodora”:

Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why  
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,  
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:  
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose,  
I never thought to ask, I never knew;  
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose  
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you  
(ll. 45–50)

“If eyes were made for seeing, then Beauty is its own excuse for being”. Simply by being what it already is, the world is beautiful. And this beauty is the only “purpose” or utility that we should seek from nature. Because eyes were, indeed, made for seeing; human beings were made to perceive the world, by the same power that made the Rhodora and the same power, significantly, that brought the poet in his unwilling rambling to this particular spot where he encounters it.

At the depths of thought that Emerson attained, intuitive obedience to natural forces, as Whitman also understood, is the same thing as spontaneity—what Emerson famously refers to in “Self-Reliance” as “Whim” (958). When we open ourselves this way, sensory perception becomes an affectionate form of participation. Contrary to the kind of looking that analyzes the world, and therefore sets us apart from it—in opposition to it, this careful reflection integrates us into a dynamic circle of processes which serve to keep the world whole and to propagate its innate beauty.

This, in fact, is the principal duty that Emerson describes for the American Scholar, that existential student who should aspire to the condition of Man Thinking—that is, to the fullest realization of the human capacity for thought:



The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. (1989b: 932–3)

And here once again, we find ourselves treading the pathway that leads to Heidegger's thought. What Emerson is talking about in "The Rhodora", what he is describing in "The American Scholar", anticipates what Heidegger would later call "letting-be", a concept first introduced in *Being and Time* (114–122), and later more extensively developed in the essay "On the Essence of Truth" (1949: 292–324). For Heidegger, the deepest use of the mind consists in a form of perception that permits the world to be what it already is. This kind of perception, because it brings Being forth into unconcealedness, through language, leads to the revelation of Truth. Interestingly, this strategy for thinking is not that dissimilar to the "revolutionary" approach to poetry that Whitman had arrived at by 1855:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddling, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. [. . .] What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me. (p. 1965)

Eventually, Heidegger came to think of letting-be, this participation in natural processes through a nurturing form of thought, as reflection (*Besinnung*). He calls it, in his essay "Science and Reflection", "a calm, self-possessed surrender to that which is worthy of questioning" (1977: 180). Recall that Emerson distinguishes between rational thinking and intuition with the terms "understanding" and "reason". Similarly, Heidegger contrasts the passive receptivity of reflection with the kind of thinking that analyzes the world into discrete parts, and ultimately dismantles it into those parts, with the intention of improving on nature,

converting the dynamic and delicately-balanced processes that ensure the unity of the world, what Emerson calls “the inexplicable continuity of this web of God”, into something else. Many would call this sort of imposition of the will a violation. In fact, Heidegger’s later thinking seems to constitute, in one sense, a prescription for a possible remedy for our culture’s precipitate career toward destruction, a prescription that would bring us back to the earth, restore us to a more harmonious relationship with nature, or Being. As he says in the same essay, “Traveling in the direction that is a way toward that which is worthy of questioning is not adventure but homecoming” (1977: 180).

### *Thinking as reception*

Clearly, Emerson and Heidegger were exploring the same pathway through Western thinking—an alternative pathway that some in our culture are still exploring today. In their attempt to bring to light the deepest sources of thought, both of them develop an essentially religious epistemology. They conceive the human mind not as an instrument to impose ideas—which leads to the imposition of actions, as well—something that it obviously has the potential to do. Much rather, they are telling us that we would use the mind more propitiously if we remember that thought is a kind of *response*—a response to something indefinable and sacred that is always *beyond*: indefinable *because* it is beyond and sacred because it is the essence of everything—which-is. As an earlier explorer on this same pathway remarked: “Everything that is, is holy.”

Of course, I realize that statements such as these almost automatically produce a set of skeptical reactions in the average cultivated Occidental reader. But maybe we should keep in mind that those reactions are also pre-determined by another part of our culture, the predominant part, and are all too often unexamined. One of the few writers I’m familiar with who has given serious consideration to the continuity of thought between Emerson and Heidegger is Stanley Cavell. In fact, a good deal of what I’m saying here is informed by the comments he makes on them in the revised edition of his book on Thoreau, *The Senses of Walden*. At one point in his discussion he places two sentences side by side: one by Heidegger, “For questioning is the piety of thinking;” the

other by Emerson, "Always our thinking is a pious reflection." Then he goes on to observe, "if one starts digging to test how deep the connection [between Emerson and Heidegger] might run, I find that one can become quite alarmed" (195).

Now this was written way back when, in the conveniently dismissible past—1981, but maybe an investigation of the depth of that connection would be worthy of our attention in these latter days. Cavell even offers a personal opinion on the skeptical reaction that this line of thinking almost inevitably provokes in our society, an opinion that I heartily approve of. He says that

the idea of thinking as reception [. . .] seems to me to be a sound intuition, specifically to forward the correct answer to skepticism (which Emerson meant to do). The answer does not consist in denying the conclusion of skepticism but in reconceiving its truth. It is true that we do not know the existence of the world with certainty; our relation to its existence is deeper—one in which it is accepted, that is to say, received. My favorite way of putting this is to say that existence is to be acknowledged. (196)

### *Toward a holistic paradigm*

We still have a lot more work to do to understand our tradition, and where we are today within it. I'm thinking most immediately about what we tend to do with the many complicated issues we have inherited from the Romantic revolution. One of those issues is the one I raised at the beginning of this essay: what we choose to do with the instrument of critical theory. But as I've also tried to point out, that question really has to do with the kind of use we choose to make of the mind. And in this context, Heidegger's brilliant "excavation" of the etymological bases of the meaning itself of the word "theory" (1977: 163–70) could provide a useful starting-point.

Isn't our behavior toward literature—what we decide to do with it, how we decide to treat it—a reflection of what we decide to do to the world? Should we impose our will, and cut the text up into arbitrary shapes that will say what we want them to say? Or should we try to act

as receptive channels and make the much more difficult and delicate attempt to permit it to be what it is, with all of its frustrating complexities and ambiguities?

I don't think I need to point out that Emerson, Heidegger, Stanley Cavell, and so many others I could name, are men. Yet the keywords here have been *yielding, obedient, passive, surrender, reception*. And their thinking promotes a harmonious integration of human thought and actions into the overall matrix of conditions that propagate life. That is, it leads us back to nature. Strange, isn't it? I hope, at least, this gives us pause for thought. Maybe we need to go back to the drawing-board, and reconceive our concepts. There's definitely a split at the heart of our culture. And the split is a dangerous one. As I've been trying to hint at all along, this dangerous split was one of the main concerns of the Romantic movement. And we need to appreciate that, because the historical pathway of Romantic thinking toward a holistic paradigm might provide us with a viable, albeit improbable, solution.

Maybe the wounds we have inflicted on the world can only be cured by changing the way we think about what we are. As Emerson wrote in 1836:

The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand, as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other. In the uttermost meaning of the words, thought is devout, and devotion is thought. (1989a: 930)

That was 170 years ago. But it's much more pertinent today. We certainly could use some healing, and some wholeness, now.

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