

2019

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Recommended Citation

Birrell, Pilar (2019) "An Emersonian Theology," *Articulāte*: Vol. 24, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol24/iss1/3>

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An Emersonian Theology

Pilar Birrell '19



What I consider to be one of the most perplexing and intriguing aspects of human existence is the almost universal inclination for individuals to spiritually connect with some divine, ultimate, and spiritual force or being that is, in many ways, enigmatic. For a large percentage of people, this inclination manifests itself in the willing adherence to an established religious tradition that embraces the existence of some conventionally understood deity/deities. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus all belong to this category of spiritual seekers, but what of the group of individuals who reject the notion of such a transcendent and superhuman creator, and who are dissatisfied with conventional religious interpretations of what I call this “universal pull towards spiritual imagination?” I have always fallen into the latter category, and have spent my life attempting to reconcile my dissatisfaction with institutionalized religions with my equally strong conviction that there is “something greater” to life that cannot be understood through any concrete sensory means, but that can only be abstractly *felt*. Through time spent reveling in the monumental beauty of the natural world, I was able to arrive at the conclusion that this “something greater” can be found within Nature herself, that we need not limit the exploration/expression of this “universal pull towards spiritual imagination” to conventions and traditions, and that pious devotion can

therefore be practiced on an individual, case by case basis. One can display piety by dutifully attending Church as one of God's children, or one can spiritually devote oneself to Nature and worship beneath the trees; both modes of religiosity are, in essence, synonymous. Upon reading the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, I found support for these personal theological convictions, and discovered an entire theology illustrated within his most famous texts. In line with my assumptions that appreciation of the natural world constitutes a religion of sorts, Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and "The Poet" construct an astoundingly sophisticated theological model in which God is reimagined as non-conformant human creative expression; moreover, Emerson depicts the Poet as a prophetic figure of sorts who is uniquely able to interpret the word of God and resist conformity through a deep connection with/understanding of Nature, and he suggests that the Poet can therefore bridge the cosmic gap between God and the physical world (humanity) and deliver the word of God by putting words to the enigmatic wonders of Nature.

In classical theology, God is customarily imagined as an absolutely transcendent being that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. As one might imagine, an interpretation of God as entirely transcendent poses a problem for human devotees in that it creates a sort of gulf between God and man which restricts our understanding and our discussions of God. In an attempt to overcome this linguistic obstacle regarding human understandings of what God is/what God wants, theologians often create metaphors- or "models"- for God so as to bridge the gulf between the divine and the human realms. In her book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, theologian Sally McFague discusses at length the ways in which different theologies employ different metaphors for

God depending on what they consider to be God's ultimate agenda in the human world. McFague argues that traditional Christian metaphors for God are inadequate and distort the Biblical message by presenting a God-Human relationship that allows for man's continued abuse of the natural world and its limited resources; she therefore proposes an imagination of the "world as God's body" as an alternative theological metaphor that would classify sin as any action/worldview that brings harm to the environment (McFague). Although this brief divergence might seem largely unrelated to the objective of this essay, Emerson's "alternative theology" in fact subscribes to this very same pantheistic belief in the divinity of the natural world. In "The Poet," he writes that, "... the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity..." (259). Since it is evident that Emerson displays similarly pantheistic beliefs, an understanding of McFague's argument and her environmentally conscious model for God is essential in order to likewise fully understand the theological implications of Emerson's work.

Similar to McFague's model of God and its attempt to reimagine the earth as "God's body," Emerson's model merges this same pantheistic philosophy with his own unique assumption that God manifests Godself in the world by way of human creativity and "self-reliance." Throughout the essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson seeks to emphasize the importance- to both society as a whole as well as the individual- of self-reliance/nonconformity, and covertly relates this idea to the topic of religious devotion with such subtle language as, "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind" (238). According to Emerson, the act of conforming to societal norms somewhat diminishes one's personhood, and moreover constitutes a

divergence from God's divine will. In reference to the majority of the population that does in fact conform to societal expectations and therefore fail to achieve self-reliance, Emerson writes that, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents... but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. It needs a divine man to exhibit any thing divine" (237). He goes on to further develop this point, and does so in a manner so eloquent that it is worth quoting at length:

Trust thyself... Accept the place that divine Providence has found for you... Great men have always done so and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort... (237)

The clear connection drawn in this passage between religious devotion and self-reliance supports a reading of "Self-Reliance" as one of McFague's "alternative metaphors for God," in which God is reimagined as *human creativity*. Emerson intriguingly presents "self trust" as an act of "divine Providence," insinuating that the dismissal of one's personal desires/beliefs in order to conform to mainstream society would likewise constitute a dismissal of God's will. The language seen here indubitably articulates a theological perspective that equates the unique thoughts of every individual with the presence of God in human bodies and suggests that faith in one's own thoughts and

feelings is inextricably tied to one's faith in God. Whereas McFague argues that disrespect/abuse of our natural world constitutes sin, Emerson's new theological model for God further develops this idea by additionally classifying social/creative conformity as sinful (237). Just as McFague's theology envisions *environmental neglect* as an act against God, Emerson's theology additionally understands *conformity* to be an act against God and His divine agenda. "Self-Reliance" provides readers with the basic structure of Emerson's theology and illustrates his assumption that self-reliance and devotion to God are intertwined; however, it is not until we analyze Emerson's equally influential work, "The Poet," that we are shown his theology in full.

If we accept Emerson's two-pronged metaphor for God - which proposes that God manifests Godself in the natural world, and that conformity limits human ability to connect with this Godly manifestation by stifling individuality/expression - then it becomes evident that the role of the poet is to hear, interpret, and deliver the messages of Nature (or God) in order to awaken spiritual seekers from their conformity-induced ignorance. Similar to the theological habit of utilizing metaphors in order to bridge the gulf between God and humanity, many theologies also look towards physical incarnations of God, such as prophets, in order to overcome the problem of God's transcendence. In his theological text, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann discusses what he believes to be the defining characteristics of a religious prophet and asserts that socially/politically effective prophetic figures are well versed in scriptural traditions and use that knowledge of tradition to evoke profound emotion among religious adherents so as to catalyze a revival of "authentic" Christianity (Brueggemann 10). In "The Poet,"

Emerson presents an illustration of the poet that beautifully parallels the aforementioned characterization of a prophet. Early on in the piece, Emerson admits that all men are born with the ability to interpret nature, but that only the poet has the unique capacity to rationalize and articulate his interpretations. Emerson writes:

I know not how it is that we need an interpreter; but the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature. There is no man who does not anticipate a supersensual utility in the sun, and stars, and earth, and water... But there is some obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in our constitution, which does not suffer them to yield the due effect. Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. (255)

Much like my earlier claim that humans experience an almost “universal pull towards spiritual imagination,” Emerson maintains that all men “anticipate a supersensual utility” in nature, but simply lack the ability to “report the conversation they have had with nature.” This observation is a rather tragic one, but is rendered somewhat less so by Emerson’s assurance that, “The poet is the person in whom these powers [of articulation] are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (255). Considering these passages alongside Brueggemann’s commentary about prophets, it makes sense to conclude that Emerson’s “Poet” represents a sort of Prophet in his theology. In line with the assumption that Emerson’s thoughts on self-reliance might be understood as a theological model for God, then the

poet- as the individual most immune to conformity and therefore most adept at communicating the secrets of Nature - can justifiably be interpreted as a prophetic figure. In the concluding paragraphs of "The Poet," Emerson slightly shifts his narrative style and employs language that sounds overtly biblical, using phrases such as "Thou shalt" and "God wills also that..." (268), that clearly invoke the image of God delivering commandments to human devotees. About the poet, Emerson writes that, "All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into Noah's arc, to come forth again to people a new world," and intriguingly follows by briefly mentioning "rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael" (268). By referencing Noah and his prophetic role in liberating God's creatures from a catastrophic flood, Emerson effectively and quite clearly invites readers to categorize the work of poets as prophetic. From his basic linguistic choices to his insistence on the poet's superior ability to commune with the natural world, Emerson cleverly presents a description of the poet as a somewhat divine manifestation of God that exists to bridge the gulf between man and God (Nature).

With the central theological elements of Emerson's work having been teased out, we are now forced to question the overall significance of the argument that the Poet is a prophetic figure who interprets the word of God via Nature and translates it for less self-reliant, non-poets. On page 264 of "The Poet," Emerson proposes that, "Poets are thus liberating gods," seemingly conflating the Poet with God in a way that would move beyond an interpretation of the poet as a prophet. However, such a reading of this passage would be largely incompatible with the theology I am claiming Emerson has constructed in these works, for it would present the poet as being an actual, transcendent God rather than a *human* vehicle for

the deliverance of God's word. The poet is not God, but is rather simply the type of human best equipped to receive, interpret, and then deliver God's will. Because he possesses such innate immunity to societal conformity, the poet preaches the word of God by way of literary/poetic production, and in this way attempts to eliminate earthly sin and suffering. But how does this eliminate suffering? What does poetry do to eliminate sin? Why is the liberative work of poets even desirable? Emerson certainly seeks to answer these questions throughout the entirety of "The Poet," but paying close attention to two specific passages can help us narrow our focus and determine how these questions might be answered. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson proclaims that, "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (238) by demanding conformity, suggesting that the liberating being done in "The Poet" is from the manhood-stripping confines of this conformity. "The Poet" argues that,

There is good reason why we should prize this liberation... On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying... Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene. (265)

These two quotations from two of Emerson's different essays seem to perfectly answer the aforementioned questions. The poet's eloquence with words breaks the restrictive chains of "society" by directing fellow humans towards self-reliance; a divine duty that is only available to the poet through his unparalleled bond with Nature. I always felt that individuals can achieve a special sort of

intellectual clarity by taking time to enjoy all that the natural world has to offer, and finding this same sentiment expressed within the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson reinforces my faith in Nature. Maybe all humanity really needs in order to right all of our wrongs is for each person to sit silently under the stars, take on the task of the poet, and listen to God.

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