FROM NATURALISM TOWARDS HUMANISM:

AN EMERSONIAN TRAJECTORY

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Perhaps the nineteenth century offers up no better example of a superseded Christianity than Ralph Waldo Emerson. But if Emerson truly superseded the church then in some ways he still continues in its project. He is still interested in the sacred. But though discrete acts of historical revelation no longer figure centrally for him, one formal feature of their structure continues to play a role in his extensive oeuvre, namely their pattern of interrelationship via the model of promise and fulfillment. Emerson applies this structure to Nature, his key theme, in several permutations. Each expression of that pattern represents a different way of making a sacred Nature accessible to human experience. But that orientation towards the human conceals a rival location for the sacred once at home in the Christian god, namely the human soul. The thesis here is that as Nature recedes in Emerson’s work from making good on its promises, the human soul rises to fill the breach. Emerson thus prepares the way for later, twentieth century religious humanisms such as we find in Buber, Levinas, and the later Derrida.
CONTENTS

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION.................................................................1

Chapter 2. EMERSON AS NATURALIST.............................................10
Nature in the Common Sense.........................................................13
Nature in the Philosophical Sense..................................................17
Nature in the Spiritual Sense.........................................................25

Chapter 3. EMERSON AS HUMANIST...............................................35
Modern Humanism........................................................................45
Levinasian Humanism...................................................................50

Chapter 4. TAKING EMERSON WHOLE: FROM NATURALISM TOWARDS
HUMANISM....................................................................................55
The Promises of Nature................................................................60
The Promises of Friendship............................................................65

Chapter 5. CONCLUSIONS..............................................................70

BIBLIOGRAPHY.............................................................................75
Chapter 1

Introduction

The nineteenth century offers up few more apt illustrations of post-Christian vision than Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is not new or original to read Emerson’s work as a secularized gospel. The debate is over the content of that gospel, whether its focus is more on nature or the human soul. According to William Rossi, “no single term in Emerson’s lexicon is more important than Nature, for understanding his multivalent achievement.”¹ In contrast, Raphaela Walda Transcendenti asserts that Emerson “was quintessentially humanist.”² Emerson’s own work suggests a competition between nature and the human soul for his deepest devotion. Much as Emerson longed to be an actual naturalist, he knew he lacked the temperament to practice even the early nineteenth century science of his own day.³ As Rossi notes, already by that time, science was moving away from its hitherto natural theology towards a new materialism that left the “universe morally bankrupt.”⁴ At the same time, friendship was a high value for Emerson throughout his life.⁵ The problem for him was how to realize it. It was always easier for Emerson to tribute friendship in poems and lectures, than to “navigate the complex emotional spaces of actual friendships.”⁶

As it happens, the Christianity Emerson was forever leaving offers up a means for

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³ Ibid., 102.
⁴ Ibid., 104.
⁶ Transcendenti, “Emerson as Humanist,” 15.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Chapter 1

Introduction

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As it happens, the Christianity Emerson was forever leaving offers up a means for measuring the relative importance nature and human relationships had for him. It is according to the relationship between promise and fulfillment, so foundational to Christianity and its parent, Judaism, that the fates of nature and friendship unfold in
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