

The Anti-Feminism of Emerson's "Nature"

Christina Zwarg, in her text, *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading*, attempts to prove the point (as do many of her contemporaries) through both Emerson's friendship with Margaret Fuller and a deep analysis of his main philosophical viewpoints that Emerson is true feminist, and that, at heart, is even an advocate for feminism. Zwarg posits Emerson's pro-feminist stance as a product of his relationship with such women as Fuller, however, the prevalence of diminutive language that existed on both sides of those relationships in regards to women and nature, I argue, points to the contrary. Furthermore, the language in "Nature" raises further questions concerning Emerson's utility for contemporary feminist thought. Although he engaged in age-old constructions of a maternal, nurturing "Mother Earth," the primary dialogue around women used in the text juxtaposes methodologies of transcendentalism itself. I will explore the cultivation of this language, its origins, and the implications of orienting "Nature" inside contemporary feminism.

1. Fuller and Emerson

As I have previously mentioned, many find Emerson's friendship to Margaret Fuller as a main reason to believe he was a feminist. Fuller was one of the first classified American Feminists, publishing texts such as *Women In The Nineteenth Century*, which were far ahead of her time in terms of questioning women's roles and female equality. Such works were the very first written feminist works to be published in the United

States. Fuller's connection to Emerson began when she accepted a job at Green Street School in Providence, Rhode Island, where she began to go to meetings and interact with the Transcendentalist Club, which Emerson founded. In this literary circle, "teaching fell by the wayside and was replaced with in-depth meetings and discussions with the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and Bronson Alcott" (American Feminism). Many critics, such as Zwarg, point to the fact that it was Emerson who first pushed her to be the editor of his transcendentalistic fueled paper, *The Dial*. Critics are quick to note that it was Emerson's relationship with Fuller that first helped get her literary legs off the ground, so to speak. He largely advocated for her to publish her feminist works such as "The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women" in which she called for women's equality" (American Feminism). The conclusion rests that because Emerson yielded to Fuller and her aspirations as a feminist, that he by and large, too, was a feminist. The allowances that Emerson gave Fuller coupled with their long correspondence (that lasted from the time she left *The Dial* to the end of her short life) about feminism is something Zwarg credits to Emerson's feminist underpinnings. Zwarg also argues that claiming Emerson was a feminist is still a rare stance to take when still so many critics of Emerson note that he has a "reading stripped of crucial feminist influences, feminist conversations, within their work" (15).

Accordingly, Zwarg defends her claim by highlighting that Emerson's inclusion of women, such as Fuller, into his world of literary prowess, coupled with ideas that are "forward thinking" show it cannot be denounced that Emerson was in fact a feminist. Even in his writing, critics insinuate that the principles of unity he peppers throughout his

essay makes his very writing progressive, and even feministic. Ironically it is Fuller who notes in her review of "Nature" that Emerson's was willing to be honest with his writing if it meant sacrificing popularity. Her contemporary writers were seeking such popularity through what she thought was a "watered down prose," focusing more on flowery language, and thus lacking the honesty that she so admired from Emerson. Unfortunately, Emerson's honesty only went so far, because it still crucially unconcerned with female issues. By saying that these popular writers "lend all their efforts to flatter corrupt tastes... the popular writer or lecturer is not to say the best he knows in as few and well-chosen words as he can... Rather he seeks to beat out a thought as thin as possible, and to consider what the audience will be most willing to receive" (Fuller 2). Fuller claims that while other authors make watered down, simplistic, and popular writings primarily concerned with what the people of the time period wanted to hear, Emerson, in contrast, is not afraid to use highly condensed, thought provoking rhetoric. As Fuller muses, he is not afraid of critics in the metaphors or pronouns he uses in his essay, and moreover, is not interested in taking his reading audience into account. Rather, he is trying to prove a point that he feels so gravely needs to be bestowed upon the American people. This same type of negligent writing that Fuller finds refreshing is the type I find to be demeaning to the same audience of intellectuals Emerson is trying so hard to enlighten. Which is, by default, the antithesis of the inclusion that Zwarg feels is so prevalent in Emerson's writing. Even though Emerson and Fuller were close friends, and he supported her decisions, this does not prove him to be a feminist. Simply looking at Fuller's words about Emerson in her review of him quickly shed light upon her

relationship with him. This missing link correlates with others' assertions of his feminism. In "Nature," Emerson cites specific sources for attaining enlightenment through nature; highlighting how *man* is to meet his needs through nature. He singularly talks of the male gender; a clearly defined, and outright "stronger" sex; one of boyhood, of "Adam" and "Caesar" who he implies "that this world (solely) exists for" (Emerson 27)." It is this aforementioned generalization for exactly *who* is able to find such enlightenment in this text: that of a male. Fuller's critique of "Nature" is, surprisingly, a restrained observation on Emerson's direct concentration on the male gender in his essay, with only brief suggestions of where women may fit into the amalgam of transcendental enlightenment. I find Fuller to be wielding echoed reflections of the Emersonian voice itself, almost a direct mimicry of his tone. This is especially clear when talking of the use of pronouns-the personification of nature and its "use" as female, and the necessary conquering of it by a strong, able bodied dominant androcentric force. In essence, Fuller simply elevates an Emerson who (through her interpretation) is misunderstood by daft masses, who, assumedly settle for simple rhetoric; noting that only esteemed intellectuals of scholarly prowess will realize Emerson's genius. Similarly, Fuller seems to make a weak, feminine nature inaudible without the voice of Emerson to make the true spark of transcendentalism come to life: "he invests himself with her serenity and animates us with her joy"(Fuller 1). As I have before mentioned, this voice seems to be a direct replicate of Emerson himself, in as far as it uses the same voice of feminine nature when talking of its exclusive use to a wise man: "Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise

spirit” (Emerson 2). I think that the similarities between the two authors is apparent in the personification of nature as female, in relation to a stronger dominant force controlling the natural feminine- on both accounts. Fuller clearly uses the same archaic terminology that Emerson does when talking of nature in a feminine way (specifically when using feminine pronouns and characteristics) that are repeatedly coupled with a seemingly strong male presence (whether Fuller’s mentioning of Emerson, or Emerson’s exemplification of masculinity) in order for the natural rhetoric to have any validity, and thus, Zwarg’s argument that Emerson was a feminist purely based on his relationship with Fuller is invalid.

Emerson rejoices in the equal balance and unity that transcendentalism offers, but the fact of the matter is that, for the majority of his essay, he only discusses how a male may reap, relish, and find a deeper understanding of himself in nature. Fuller and Emerson idealize a Herculean figure of intellectual and philosophical rigor to engage, understand, and indulge in transcendentalism; Fuller notes it is “of Greece --men who taught their fellows to plough and avoid moral evil, sing hymns to the gods, and watch the metamorphoses of nature. Here in civic Boston was such a man -- one who could see man in his original grandeur” (Fuller 2). I find the singularity of whom Emerson and Fuller both address belittling. The “grandeur” of masculinity in all its glory whilst cultivating a personified mother earth is a resounding theme that Emerson very eloquently uses in his essay. Fuller though, not stopping there, continues to amend that it is the robust and muscular strokes of Emerson’s pen that ingeniously enlightens this masculine connection to nature twofold. While Fuller may have been a renowned

feminist, the sway Emerson has on her is apparent, particularly in her response to his works. If this is any inclination of what their friendship was like, it is clear that Emerson carried the majority of the influence, and thus Fuller's feminist ideals failed to successfully impact him.

2. The Cultivation of Mother Nature

Even after debunking Emerson's connection to feminism, the question that remains, is why Emerson's language in "Nature" has important implications for transcendentalism, and its contemporary reading audience as a whole. It is necessary to analyze both the relationship of gender and its connection to nature that Emerson previously himself made from an ecofeminist perspective. Going back to a point of contrast, Zwarg also notes that some opponents of these viewpoints deny Emerson's feminism by saying that "Emerson labors ultimately and conservatively to fashion an abusive 'man-making rhetoric'" (16). However, when reading Emerson's own words the validity of those critics becomes clear, "by the wit of *man*...he paves the road with iron bars, and mounting a coach with a ship-lead of men, animals, and merchandise behind him...sets his house upon the road" (Emerson 5). In his discussion of the commodities of nature, Emerson talks only of the male subjugation of it. Throughout the entirety of "Nature," Emerson maintains this virile dominion of nature to reap a deeper sense of what he subdues, but only after using all of the best it has to offer. While some schools of thought maintain that Emerson's reference to "man" encompasses all spectrums of humanity, looking at the gender roles in which Emerson allocates to this term will assure us otherwise. Emersonian critic Lewis Leary unequivocally states, it is this gender

placement on terminology, which “inspired men’s resolve by conquering nature” (“An Interpretive Essay” 1). Leading Ecofeminist Karen J. Warren so artfully echoes androcentric philosophies that are indeed “masculine and centered around rationality, to the exclusions of its contrasts, especially characteristics regarded as feminine...or natural” (“Introduction to Ecofeminism” 6). Of works such as “Nature,” Warren asserts naturalistic works are only patriarchal when they “explain, justify, and maintain relationships of domination and subordination” (Warren 2). Warren highlights that both women and nature are seen by these domineering patriarchal forces as “mysterious and uncontrollable,” so it has ever since became the androcentric pursuit to tame both, as Emerson so vividly exemplifies in “Nature.” In Emerson’s essay, his prescription of taming a feminine nature as man’s duty is clear when he quotes George Herbert’s poem “Man,” in his essay saying, “And to all the world besides/and both with moons and tides/But man hath caught and kept it as his prey” (Emerson 18).

When Emerson asserts that “Man is a god in ruins” in his section under “Prospects” in “Nature”, he is using a “cathartic victimage” (a sense of feeling guilty about neglecting nature, and therefore sympathetic to the spirituality of nature) that Kenneth Burke says is so commonly Emersonian. Emerson tugs at the fact that because we don’t use nature to *her* full advantage, then it by fault leaves man at a greater loss. Yet, nature is “waiting on man” to make full use of it: “More servants wait on man than he’ll ever take notice of” (Emerson 5). Emerson notes that man has not taken full advantage of nature, and by default has gotten disconnected with himself, and therefore lazy. Contrarily, this feminine nature is seen as being submissive to the whims of man,

“waiting” for him to make use of her. The dichotomy is problematic because Emerson’s argument states that man must use nature in order to feel whole with himself, yet nature’s only want or need is to bend to man’s will, needing or seeking nothing in return. Yet, even in nature’s want to submit to the will of man he is hesitant to make use of *her*. This, Emerson claims, comes from the fact that she is mysterious and unpredictable, “because her dice are always loaded, that in *her* heaps and rubbish are concealed sure and useful results” (Emerson). It is this same oxymoronic terminology of *her* “rubbish with results” that Warren argues is involved with tying the character of women to the idea of nature as “an organic model as a benevolent female and nurturing mother...nature was female” (6). Even though Emerson implies a sanctifying process for men he describes the use of nature; he cautions that nature is yielding to man, yet unpredictable and at times difficult to subdue. I argue Burke’s point even further to say that Emerson uses “cathartic victimage” to make man feel guilty about not cultivating this sense of mother nature, but also not doing it with an aggressive enough dominance that seems to be needed to be the key to really benefit from, or enjoy nature.

3. The Origins of Personified Nature

After finding the damaging implications of the language in “Nature,” it’s important to note where this connection (of women and nature) came from in the first place, and the ways in which Emerson’s drew upon it is powerful and demeaning. In “her” relation to man, nature is supposed to “work through the will of a man filled with ... her first works” (Emerson 8). This connotation used superfluously in the text is actually an ancient one, first discovered in the pre-patriarchal Mediterranean world

religions throughout Eurasia, around the time of about 4,500 BC. Laura Hobgood-Oster, Environmental Professor at Southwestern University, in her essay, “Ecofeminism: Historic and International Evolution” states that, “matriarchal and rarely militaristic societies existed before Indo-Aryan invaders slowly destroyed these [matriarchal] cultures” (4). Substantiating such work, Hobgood-Oster posits that before invaders, women oftentimes would be placed in roles of leadership. Warren also asserts that this was a period in time as “matrifocal, matrilineal, and a peaceful agrarian era” (Warren 3). These such cultures placed an intrinsic emphasis on childbearing and motherhood in which “fertility goddesses and other nature symbolisms [would be] figured prominently” (Hobgood-Oster 4). In her essay, Warren goes on to conclude that after these cultures were taken over, so were their feminine ways of religion. They soon become male oriented to follow suit with the culture. This systematically charged hyper-personification of women being tied to nature is one by now almost innate to man as much as religion, or myth, and is drawn upon by Emerson to prove a point about spirituality in nature. For a coherent part of an essay which is seen as a part of the roots of the “progressive American cannon,” to rely on such an obvious trope seems oxymoronic. Furthermore, when the very roots of this philosophy are based upon a misogynistic conglomerate of the rape and pillage of women it becomes increasingly difficult to label a wielder of such thought, in this case Emerson, as progressively feminist.

4. The Final Result

What, then, is the final, existing result of such a detrimental connotation in “Nature?” In the section of “Language,” Emerson makes a few points at the beginning to

exemplify how nature is of use to man through summarizing that it attests to spirituality by symbolizing the “seen” in the physical world. Since “words” represent the natural things going on about us, Emerson notes that nature actualizes the spirituality in the wilderness around us. He emphasizes the importance of language because we use natural, audible words to describe the inarticulable emotional and physical ones. As he says, we place a high value on symbolizing our expressions through the channel of natural words: “we say the heart to express emotion, the head to denote thought, and thought and emotion are words borrowed from sensible things...now appropriated to spiritual nature” (10). That is to say, we get our thoughts of deep spiritual ambition from nature and use that drive to help us relate to things; we feel by using the symbolitry around us through expressions of language by what we are feeling. Nature helps us establish our thoughts into metaphors and similes since we all use natural images to communicate ideas or feelings. Kenneth Burke, in his critique of “Nature,” suggests that the section differs from the rest of the essay, for, rather than using victimage or catharsis to make man resonate his feelings with nature, he uses words of realism and actuality to establish a sense of importance in nature when it comes to the subject of man using language. In this same sense of established “realism” when Emerson talks of language, he signifies that when we use symbolism to describe nature, it is a tender thing because it directly reflects the way we communicate (and after being immersed in nature, being enriched by it in a transcendental sense, we do this in its purest form in effect, by communicating purely with others, as we were made to.) Emerson makes apparent the analogous nature of the comparison with how we relate transient things to concrete

things, and through that, he notes the importance of the enveloping nature of a larger patriarchal presence by saying “Spirit hath life in itself, and in *man* in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language as the FATHER” (10). Value again is placed in finding spirituality in the place of masculinity. As a result, what we see are these aforementioned metaphors and similes made from natural comparisons quickly turn subjugative towards the “othered” sex as a result. Emerson points out what should be pure comparisons of emblematic symbolism when dealing with nature: “an enraged *man* as a lion, a cunning *man* is a fox, a firm *man* is a rock, a learned *man* is a torch” (10). When the emphasis is placed on *man* and fails to enunciate where women are placated in nature, the connection of symbols concurrent with natural things used to express analogies or similes quickly turns into something base and dark. Warren invokes how women are described when dealing with nature: “...languages used to describe women, [in] nature...in animalistic terms (e.g., as cows, chicks. Serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussycates, bird-brains, hair brains)” (5). Again, it is important to note the detrimental connection between women and nature. When people fail to mention that this rhetoric exists, as they have for a long time, they leave out an important feminine part of the Transcendental experience. The missed dialogue that I am referring to is the “Nature--the unity in variety-- that meets us everywhere. All endless variety of things make an identical impression...back to Unity” this “unity” that Emerson so heavily relies on to make transcendentalism effective, is lost when it only refers to one gender in the language, comparisons, metaphors, and symbols he uses (Emerson 15). To infer as Fuller implies to be an “intellectual,” able to absorb Emerson’s text must, quite literally taken,

must also mean that a strong male presence must also be needed to accurately drive transcendentalism into life application. In actuality, this would leave out a large majority of his reading audience. To progressive feminists in today's society, this leaves little dialogue open to find a "place" in the realm of transcendentalism. While feminists can keep the raw, bare-bone meaning of transcendentalism the same (the immersion of a soul in nature) most other things would have to change for it to be applicable to today's women. I find it difficult to characterize Emerson as a feminist, or furthermore, a progressive thinker, when he was, in fact, leaving out these vital aspects of feminism in his philosophies and writings. When Emerson ties women to these ancient tropes of mythology (and the corruption of women and nature) it becomes hard to see the new ideas and conceptions he includes about nature applicable, or believable, to any one person. As contemporary readers, to avoid these pitfalls is to acknowledge as a reading audience how some of these ancient connections are isolating, ineffective, derogatory, and counterintuitive to the heart of what Transcendentalism ideally is, and the heart of it...one of unity. In order for our progression as a literary society in an ever growing and converging world and society, we must separate the harmful ties of women and nature, and take the parts of Emerson which better incorporate the soul-searching embodiment of nature as a people, in a time when unity was never more sorely needed for this planet.

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