

## the ralph waldo emerson society

# Between Self-Reliance and Responsibility: Rereading the Emersonian Sublime in an Age of Crisis

David Lombard, *Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research*

In "The Over-Soul" (1841), Emerson defines the eponymous concept as the "Unity" or "whole" within which "every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (52). Although the Over-soul is ineffable, "[w]e know that all spiritual being is in man" and one can communicate with the divine through "revelation" of the "emotion of the sublime" (53-57, emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> The Emersonian Sublime thus bridges the gap between the human and the divine, making us aware of our boundless capacities.

"Self-Reliance", published in the same year, builds on this idea of transcendental potentiality that exists in every individual's "inner light" and that is accessible through the sublime. For instance, he claims that "[w]e but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents" while urging us to emancipate from social control:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (20-21)

Since society deprives us of our primitive instincts and our connection with Nature, the sublime occurs in a renewed relationship with our environment.

In my book *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene* (2019), I warn against the works of transcendentalists such as Emerson and Walt Whitman inasmuch as they may convey a "self-centered aesthetics" which logically worship human accomplishments next to divine nature without critically interrogating the environmental impact of industrialization and technology (Lombard 35). For example, "Self-Reliance" encourages any "nonconformist" individual to "st[an]d alone" in nature and apart from society and "to believe that what is true for [her] in [her] private heart is true for all men" (Gura 213-14). Some of Emerson's contemporaries like Elizabeth Peabody (1804-94) even labelled his philosophy as "egotheism" since it only rejects man's conceptions of God to put individuals on pedestals (Gura 216). In "Experience" (1844), Emerson further develops his theory and writes that "[d]ivinity is behind our failures and follies" and that "[n]ever mind the ridicule" or "the defeat", there is "victory" and "justice" for all (89-101). This passage implies that even "failures" and "follies" bear the mark of the divine and

may therefore be at the genesis of commendable actions, however destructive they might turn. Readers of Emerson's texts could, as literary critic Paul Crumbley argues, view Emerson's texts as "self-oriented" and as promoting "aggressive optimism" (29-41).

But this form of optimism was also beneficial inasmuch as it contributed to a shift in wilderness aesthetics. As historian Roderick F. Nash have shown, the wilderness was originally an intricate biblical concept synonymous to a "desert" of both nonhuman and artificial confusion and disorder, and responsible for the stigmatized "wilderness condition" or the "necessity of living in close proximity to wild country" (3-24). The "wilderness condition" was promoted by frontiersmen who radically opposed "uncontrolled" to "conquered" nature since the wilderness had no place in the paradise of biblical pastoralism (24). In the early nineteenth-century, frontier rhetoric frequently made use of "waste-to-garden imagery" by advocating that wasted or "useless" nature consisted in the "ungodly" and "'uncultivated' land" that was not yet transformed into a garden and was thus still terrifyingly dangerous (32-33). Conflating the wilderness with frontier ideology and the sublime, Nash explains that the American view of nature came a long way from what he refers to as "antipathy" to "appreciation" of wilderness. As I have shown, Emerson's texts could, if unwisely interpreted, serve to legitimate this "antipathy" as well as unfettered expansion. I believe, however, that Emerson advocated a positive change in our attitude toward the natural world. No longer subscribing to frontier ideology, the Emersonian Sublime instills Nature with spiritual meaning which is capable of elevating the soul and invites us to rethink our relationship with our environment.

What if the Emersonian Sublime was still an invitation? I want to believe that the Emersonian Sublime is more than a plea for self-reliance. It is an uplifting call to reexplore our inner self and to develop a genuine sense of broader responsibility toward nonhumans and humans alike. In the light of the global ecological crisis and pandemic, the Emersonian Sublime urges us not to repeat our "failures and follies" but to deeply reflect upon their severe consequences, to learn from them, and to turn them into "justice" for all. Reconsidering our actions and lifestyle also compels us to redefine our relationship with what we have so far viewed as beautiful or sublime. The "nonconformist" individual is not exactly a social outcast, or one who renounces any interactions with other beings. Emersonian nonconformism highlights the urgency to stop blindly embracing everything that our society has thrown at us and to constantly question the legitimacy and utility of both our and others' actions. After all, the "transparent eye-ball" metaphor itself might also be an invitation to start unveiling the appearances that were designed to conceal and protect injustices, and to begin to find problems where we had always seen solutions.

[1] The sublime is a notion that has been mainly used and studied in literary history and philosophy to generally refer to what cannot be fully described or apprehended (e.g., infinity or God), and it has therefore been commonly associated with senses of excess, overwhelm and disorientation. For example, the "natural sublime", as theorized by philosopher Edmund Burke, has been said to put the individual in a fraught relationship of inferiority and fear to divine nature.

### Works Cited

Crumbley, Paul. "Contesting the Sublime: New Versions of An Alternative American Tradition." *SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature*, Swiss Association of University Teachers of English, 2002, pp. 29-43.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience." *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, edited by Stanley Applebaum, Thrift Editions, Dover, 1993, pp. 83-101.

—. "Self-Reliance." *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, edited by Stanley Applebaum, Thrift Editions, Dover, 1993, pp. 19-38.

—. "The Over-Soul." *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, edited by Stanley Applebaum, Thrift Editions, Dover, 1993, pp. 51-64.

Gura, Philip F. *American Transcendentalism: A History*. Hill & Wang, 2008.

Lombard, David. *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene*. Quodlibet, 2019.

orbi.uliege.be, <https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/213150> (<https://orbi.uliege.be/handle/2268/213150>).

Nash, Roderick F. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Fifth edition, Yale University Press, 2014.

Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. Routledge, 2017.

Bio and contact details:

David Lombard is a research fellow at the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), a Ph.D. candidate in Literary Studies (American Literature and Environmental Humanities) at the universities of Liège and Leuven (joint degree), where he is an active member and researcher of/at the research units/centers Traverses, the Interdisciplinary Center for Applied Poetics (CIPA), Intersections, and the Leuven Research Group English Literature, and a singer-songwriter and musician. His main fields of interests are American (literary) studies, environmental humanities, narratology, rhetoric and aesthetics. He is the author of the book *Techno-Thoreau: Aesthetics, Ecology and the Capitalocene* (2019) and of articles, which served as extended pilot studies for his broader Ph.D. project funded by the FNRS, which consists in a rhetorical and narratological analysis of the sublime in contemporary U.S. literature (2020-2024). His favorite places to do research and write songs are as much the bustling centers of Liège and Leuven as the wooded south of Belgium, which both enrich his reflections on the techno-nature of the Anthropocene.

Email address: [David.Lombard@uliege.be](mailto:David.Lombard@uliege.be)

[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](https://www.wordpress.com)