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Part I

Emerson

1. Building His Own World

> A man must do the work with that faculty he has now. But that faculty is the accumulation of past days. . . . No rival can rival backwards. What you have learned and done, is safe and fruitful. Work and learn in evil days, in insulted days, in days of debt and depression and calamity. Fight best in the shade of the cloud of arrows.
>
> —EMERSON, JMN 10:41[1]

A Moving World Without a Sun

On February 8, 1831, Ellen Tucker Emerson, the wife of a young Boston minister, died of tuberculosis at home at nine in the morning. She was just nineteen. She had met her husband—who would

become a well-known writer, lecturer, and public figure—in Concord, New Hampshire, when she was sixteen and he was eight years older. Ellen was engaged at seventeen, married at eighteen, and now, a year and four months later, she was dead, and her young husband was devastated. His name was Ralph Waldo Emerson, known to friends and family as Waldo.

Five days after Ellen's death, this twenty-seven-year-old Unitarian minister turned to his journal and wrote:

> Five days are wasted since Ellen went to heaven to see, to know, to worship, to love, to intercede . . . Reunite us, O thou father of our spirits. There is that which passes away and never returns. This miserable apathy, I know, may wear off. I almost fear when it will. Old duties will present themselves with no more repulsive face. I shall go again among my friends with a tranquil countenance. Again I shall be amused. I shall stoop again to little hopes and little fears and forget the graveyard. But will the dead be restored to me? Will the eye that was closed on Tuesday ever beam again in the fulness of love for me? Shall I ever again be able to connect

> the face of outward nature, the mists of the morn, the stars of eve, the flowers, and all poetry, with the heart and life of an enchanting friend? No. There is one birth, and one baptism, and one first love, and the affections cannot keep their youth any more than men.[2]

This is a beautifully written entry with a memorable conclusion. But note also Emerson's rapid movement of thought, from conventional Christian pieties to a mild but embarrassed self-loathing; from questioning the idea of an afterlife to a final, blunt acceptance of mortality, of "one birth, and one baptism, and one first love," with the clear conclusion that there is one life and when it is over, it is over.

The entire passage is not only a forthright expression of grief, but also a premonition of the process young Emerson would go through over the next year and a half. Ellen's death plunged him into a "miserable apathy" that did not, in fact, wear off quickly. He was somber and preoccupied with his loss, walking out from Boston to Roxbury to visit her grave every day.

He was, in his own words, "unstrung, debilitated by grief." In the days just after her death he

imagined he could still hear her breathing, could see her dying. He called out to her, prayed to her as an intercessory saint. He wrote that his whole life was one of "unrepaired regret." Everything was colored by the "heaviness of the fact of death."

Ellen had wanted to be a poet, had called her dog "Byron," and surviving examples of her writing show real promise.

> So I, unless God's guiding love
> Had brought thee to me from above,
> Might now have lived but half an one,
> A moving world without a sun.[3]

In June 1831, five months after her death, Emerson—himself a would-be poet—composed what we can read as a response to Ellen's lines.

> The days pass over me
> And I am still the same
> The Aroma of my life is gone
> Like the flower with which it came.[4]

As empty as he felt, however, he still had his job to do, his pastoral duties to perform. These included preaching and acting as spiritual guide to others just when he most needed one himself.

He managed to carry on, exhibiting a physical and intellectual resilience. He undertook a series of sermons that re-examined parts of the Bible using the method of the new German Higher Criticism, which his older brother William had studied with the great theologian Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), and which Waldo was now eager to learn and apply. This new method studied biblical texts by comparing them with each other, in their original languages. In this method the Bible was not something to venerate and accept uncritically as the word of God, but a set of historical documents like any other documents produced by men.

Along with his biblical studies, the bereft young Emerson was reading ever more deeply in what was then called natural philosophy but which we know as science. He read Mary Somerville's *Mechanism of the Heavens* (1831), an abridged English translation of Pierre Simon Laplace's French masterpiece on celestial mechanics. Somerville was a major scientist in her own right, proposing from her own observations of irregularities in the orbit of Uranus that there might be a hitherto unknown planet nearby: she was correct, and her research contributed to the discovery of Neptune. Emerson also found inspiration

in John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1831), which he was reading on the last day of December of that year. An investigator into natural phenomena, Herschel wrote, "cannot help perceiving that the insight he is enabled to obtain into this internal sphere of thought and feeling is in reality the source of all his power." Herschel described the natural philosopher as "Accustomed to trace the operation of general causes, and the exemplification of general laws, in circumstances where the uninformed and uninquiring eye perceives neither novelty nor beauty, he walks in the midst of wonders."

We can guess at the state of mind of the young minister when, in January 1832, not long after reading Herschel, he made this short journal entry: "It is the worst part of a man, I sometimes think, that is the minister."[5]

Not quite two months later, Emerson walked out to Roxbury to Ellen's tomb as usual, but this trip was very different, because this time he opened the coffin and looked at the body of his young wife, who had died fourteen months earlier. He wrote down nothing—or nothing that has survived—of what he saw. He wrote once

about the "vanishing volatile froth of the present," and he would later say, of Thomas Carlyle: "his imagination, finding no nutriment in any creation, avenged itself by celebrating the majestic beauty of the laws of decay."[6] What exactly met his eye that day cannot have been pleasant, but he had to see it for himself.

Two months later, in May, Emerson told his Boston congregation, "I regard it as the irresistible effect of the Copernican Astronomy to have made the theological scheme of Redemption absolutely incredible." "Irresistible" and "absolutely incredible" do not suggest tentative or exploratory notions. The sentence is rock solid. As he had to see Ellen's remains for himself, so he now realized and accepted that he had to think for himself as well.

The Lord's Supper

Seven short days after this bold declaration of independent thought, Emerson wrote a letter (now lost) resigning from his position as junior minister in Boston's Second Church. The move signaled his separation from the ministry as a calling, and from Unitarian Christianity. Just as he was drafting his letter of resignation—maybe the very

same day—he noted in his journal, "I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry."[7]

Emerson left formal, inherited, traditional Christianity in 1832 and never returned. But he did not want to walk away from the personal, the social, the human relations, the communion between and among like-minded people of faith—his parishioners. Emerson might no longer be a proper Christian, but he still had, and would always have, a religious nature. We can see this clearly in the sermon he gave as his farewell to his church on September 9, 1832, when he was twenty-nine years old.

The sermon discussed the Lord's Supper, also known as Communion. Here is how Emerson presented his subject:

> In the history of the Church no subject has been more fruitful of controversy than the Lord's Supper. There never has been any unanimity in the understanding of its nature, nor any uniformity in the celebrating it. . . . Having recently given particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for per-

> petual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples, and, further, to the opinion that it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do. Now observe the facts.

Emerson then laid out his argument, which looks at the subject critically rather than reverentially:

> Two of the Evangelists, namely Matthew and John, were of the twelve disciples, and were present on that occasion. Neither of them drops the slightest intimation of any intention on the part of Jesus to set up anything permanent. John, especially, the beloved disciple, who has recorded with minuteness the conversation and the transactions of that memorable evening, has quite omitted such a notice. Neither does it appear to have come to the knowledge of Mark who, though not an eyewitness, relates the other facts. This material fact, that the occasion was to be remembered, is found in Luke alone, who was not present.

It is significant that Emerson chose the subject of Communion to make his break with the Church. What he is objecting to is Communion as a universal sacrament, something to be required of all

Christians forever, an action formally prescribed for all time. What he does not object to is communion with a small c, the bonds between people. No longer interested in the religion of people who lived many centuries ago, he very much wanted "a religion by revelation to *us* and not the history of theirs."

He would develop these ideas in his 1836 book, *Nature*, but in 1832 he was still carving out his position, still reacting against formal, inherited, dogmatic Christianity. In October 1832, he was making comments on Christianity that have a bit of the saltiness and pithiness of the best of Thomas Carlyle, whose work Emerson was reading at the time. In his journal, Emerson imagined a little dialogue.

"You must be humble because Christ says 'Be humble.'"
"But why must I obey Christ?"
"Because God sent him."
"But how do I know God sent him?"
"Because your own heart teaches the same thing he taught."
"Why then should I not go to my own heart first?"

On December 22, Emerson wrote a final letter to his church explaining his position: "To me, as one disciple, is the ministry of truth, as far as I can discern and declare it, committed, and I desire to live nowhere and no longer than that grace of God is imparted to me." In other words, he is now committed to the truth *as he sees it*. And we can see from the tortured syntax how Emerson struggles to reconcile his need to pursue the truth as he sees fit with his desire to keep his connection, his communion, with his congregation: "I rejoice to believe, my ceasing to exercise the pastoral office among you, does not make any real change in our spiritual relation to each other." Emerson's intellectual and theological break with the Church was now complete, however strongly he hoped to keep his ordinary human, social bonds with his fellow men and women. Three days later he left Boston and boarded a ship bound for Europe.

2. I Will Be a Naturalist

Emerson's physical condition at the end of December 1832 was so poor that Captain Ellis, of the brig *Jasper*, was reluctant to take him on board lest he not survive the voyage. But Emerson did go,

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