

Fate and Skepticism: Emerson's Threnody

Joseph Kallo

Winner of the Larry Taylor Award

Accounting for motion is one of the most difficult problems for an idealism which has its ideal as somehow perfect or complete; the trouble comes in describing how the flux of experience is commensurable with the motionlessness of being itself. Plato's idealism compensates by relegating the changeable and unexpected to a lower realm than the one inhabited by the true and unchanging forms. Plato accounts for the intrusion of the unexpected by making it less real—by confining it to a metaphysical realm which is only a shadow of the real. Emerson's naturalistic commitments prevent him from making the radical separation between the real and apparent that Plato does. Unlike Plato, Emerson sees the ideal in the context of the sensible. Nature is itself the real and ideal. This is especially interesting to note in the context of the overabundant tragedy which occurs in Emerson's life. Though there are several incidents which must have brought his idealism into question, the death of his son Waldo arguably leaves the most pronounced impression on the written works which Emerson leaves us. Two essays "Fate" and "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic" as well as the poem "Threnody" are especially rich with the traces of Emerson's struggle to understand the death of his son in the context of his philosophic idealism. The two essays address issues of resignation to fate as well as a particular sort of skepticism, and the poem, situated chronologically between the two essays offers a blend of the two themes. I will argue in this paper that these three works taken together offer the evolution of Emerson's struggle to understand the death of his son and the challenge it poses to his idealism.

We see Emerson's idealism challenged in "Threnody": "because general hope/ Was quenched, and all must doubt and grope. Perchance not he but Nature ailed/ The world and not the infant failed." To see the contrast which Threnody makes with Emerson's idealism we might take a few lines from "Each and All" written a few years before his son's birth: ". . . Full of light and deity;/ Again I saw, again I heard,/ The rolling river, the morning bird;—/ Beauty through my senses stole; I yielded myself to the perfect whole."¹ This sentiment is echoed in the famous lines from "Nature": "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blythe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I am a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."² In the former example, we have the image of a surrender to a complete unification with the perfect

whole of nature; in the latter we see that the unity which Emerson surrenders to is God.

The lines from "Threnody" offer a harsh counterpoint to the metaphors of "Each and All" and "Nature." In the poem, Emerson expresses the very different possibility that the world, rather than unified and complete, is itself a flawed thing. The death of his son is not due to some failing within the child himself; Emerson does not consider the possibility that the six-year-old child is in some sense guilty. We should also note at this point that Emerson does not present the problem, if he can be said to present it at all, in the traditional fashion. That is, his lament in "Threnody" is not an expression of the problem of evil; he does not wonder how a benevolent God could allow such tragedy. Instead, Emerson wonders if Nature itself could have failed in some way by allowing his son to die before growing into the adult he imagines. As we will address later, Emerson's concern is with the nature of his direct experience. The crisis caused by the death of his son is concerned with a failure within the world of Emerson's experience rather than a questioning of some isolated ideal realm.

Between lines 176 and 208 we find several themes echoed in both "Fate" and "The Skeptic." The voice of these lines is attributed to the "deep Heart" and the words are spoken as a response to the lament Emerson utters in the first part of the poem. We imagine the "deep Heart" is a placeholder for the totalizing notion of God or Nature; its voice is absent from the first part of the poem. Between 176 and 208 the voice suggests to Emerson that his lament is made in ignorance of the "greater Plan" which the "deep Heart" itself has in mind. His lament is also an oversight of the "vision" which the "deep Heart" gave to Emerson to allow him to use the signs of nature to rise beyond his grief (as well as beyond religion and speech) and see the mysteries of Nature's heart. The "deep Heart" chastises Emerson for neglecting its own design as well as for neglecting the vision of the "eternal being"—the vision of the transparent eye in "Nature." "The ground occupied by the skeptic is the vestibule of the temple."³ This sentence expresses the importance Emerson places on the skeptic, as it also suggests the transitory or developmental nature of the skeptical stance. Emerson makes this assertion in roughly the middle of his essay "Montaigne; or, the Skeptic," and to understand what he might mean by it we need to explore the context in which it occurs. This essay is, chronologically, the earliest of the three works I have taken up here; it is written in 1845—roughly three years after the death of his son. I think we can find ample evidence in the essay to suggest that Emerson considers skepticism as a stage, as a vestibule of the temple. Emerson begins the essay with a suggestion that we come to philosophy with a predisposition to either idealism or materialism. The former he characterizes as "the studious class" and

the middle ground between these two extremes. The skeptic must be the one who wears the intellectual coat of "woven elastic steel" which is more fluid than the "Stoic schemes" and more resilient and tough minded than St. John's teachings of love.⁵ In short, the skeptic is demonstrated in the writings of Montaigne who, according to Emerson, is both shrewd and worldly, but enjoys nothing more than plain speech and the simple pleasures of his home: "His writing has no enthusiasms, no aspiration; contented, self-respecting and keeping the middle of the road."⁶ We are not born skeptics. The two extremes of thought which Emerson identified are each characterized by a strong belief: the moralist believes in the reality of the ideal realm and the man of the world believes in the value of the material. "We are natural believers."⁷ The skeptic, then occupies a space above the person who passionately holds the beliefs that their nature inclines them toward. The skeptic's principle attitude toward these natural inclinations in belief is a profound doubt. The reflex beliefs held by the mass of society offer the skeptic no solace because these beliefs are cherished and held only "in their tendency and spirit."⁸ The skeptic cannot hold beliefs simply because he is inclined to by his temperament.

We might ask what would bring one to leave either of the two extremes of belief and assume the middle ground of skepticism. Emerson suggests that some people are incapable of truly calling centrally held beliefs into question and others are naturally inclined to do so. The reason for the difference is "a question of temperament, or of more or less immersion in nature."⁹

It is the latter possibility that should be noted here, though Emerson says almost nothing more about it in this essay. We might imagine that Emerson means to suggest that the more one becomes aware of one's situatedness in nature, the less sure she becomes of her natural inclination to believe in either a simple idealism or materialism. Again, Emerson separates himself from the traditional idealisms by founding his ideal in immediate experience. The more we pay attention to the world around us and our part in its workings, the more we are likely to doubt our belief that the world is a reflection of an ideal or that the world is simply and only a material thing. The skeptic, in her situatedness in nature, is closer to discovering Emerson's ideal than either the dogmatic religious believer or the materialist.

We should have some clue as to why Emerson calls the skeptic a "spiritualist." Emerson's spiritualist is a person who is prompted to express her faith by, in Emerson's words, "a series of skepticisms."¹⁰ In what seems outwardly a paradoxical assertion, Emerson holds that the skeptical stance is the most fitting outlook for the spiritualist. Or rather, the person immersed in nature is likely to be a skeptic. Because the skeptic cannot simply accept the unquestioned beliefs of society, she is driven to doubt even the most orthodox of religious beliefs: "even the doctrines dear to the hope of man, of the Providence and of the immortality of the soul, his neighbors can not put the statement so that he shall affirm it."¹¹ We

should wonder, then, where Emerson's skepticism leads us. We have seen him favor the skeptic as one more immersed in nature and hence more likely to prevent herself from dogmatically accepting either of the two extremes of thought. We also have the enigmatic statement with which I began this essay, "the ground occupied by the skeptic is the vestibule of the temple." What, then, is the temple? Why does the spiritualist doubt the fundamental tenants of her belief? If we look to "Threnody," we see that the skepticism is part and parcel of the vision which the "deep Heart" chastises Emerson for neglecting. It says "I gave thee sight—where is it now?/ I taught thy heart beyond the reach/ Of ritual, bible, or of speech."¹² The vision imparted by the "deep Heart" is the ability to look beyond the confining structures of particular beliefs: "[the spiritualist] denies out of more faith, and not less. He denies out of honesty. He had rather stand charged with the imbecility of skepticism, than with untruth . . . your dogmas seem to me caricatures: why should I make believe them?"¹³ The spiritualist doubts and by doubting forces himself beyond the confines of regulated belief and the "blasphemy of grief" to a vision of the "mysteries of Nature's heart." In "Nature" Emerson says "Fortune, Minerva, Muse, Holy Ghost,—these are quaint names, too narrow to cover this unbounded substance."¹⁴ The clear-eyed sight given by Emerson's skepticism sees these "mysteries of Nature's heart" as an intricate web of the workings of the "deep Heart." Emerson is asked by the "deep Heart" if, in the desire to undo his son's death, he means to interfere with Nature's processes: "nail the wild car on its track/ On the half-climbed zodiac?"¹⁵ The implication here, made explicit in "Fate," is that the designs of nature are not under our control in any simple sense. Nature proceeds according to its own workings, and we are part of the process.

At this point it sounds as if the skeptic is standing outside the "temple of fate" and must leave behind her skepticism in order to enter the sanctuary, but a look to "Fate" leaves this matter unresolved. On the one hand Emerson holds that the "book of Nature is the book of fate"¹⁶ but on the other hand he asserts that "Intellect annuls Fate."¹⁷ We might begin to unravel this apparent contradiction by noting that at the end of the essay Emerson delivers an exhortation in which he suggests we "build altars to the Beautiful Necessity."¹⁸ It is clear then, that he wishes to leave the subject with reliance on a fate that is in some sense beautiful and worthy of worship. He begins the essay, however, by discussing the relation between physical characteristics and types of personality. One is given the sense that Emerson believes that our personality is determined by the physical circumstances which make us up. Read in this way, fate becomes a matter of physical causality and we see that the book of nature is indeed the book of fate. Fate in this sense is a limitation. We aspire to great heights but we are always

which aspires?

The world for Emerson is dual. Fate is the strong limiting force but it is opposed by what Emerson variously calls "Power" or "Intellect." Human thought is, for Emerson, an antagonism to fate. Fate pushes us toward its inevitable ends, but our thought acts as a force working against these ends. Emerson suggests that we are fated to die of various deadly diseases only until we can penetrate the causes of disease with our mind. Our thought frees us from the bounds of fate. At this point, though, it seems as if Emerson is suggesting that we ought to remain skeptics. The difference between the person who, upon seeing the ravages of typhoid, resigns himself to his fated end in disease and the person who doubts that the disease is inevitable seems to be that the later abstains from the commonly held belief. The scientists who cure diseases often work against a moral sentiment which suggests that in some way the person suffers from some action of God or fate. In the power of thought which challenges fate we find, then, something of the skepticism which it seemed had been transcended upon entering the temple of fate. But how do we understand a fate which can be challenged by skepticism? And how can one resign oneself to fate, as the closing of the essay suggests, while retaining a skepticism which calls into questions the workings of fate?

Emerson's answer to these questions seems to be this: "To offset the drag of temperament and race, which pulls down, learn this lesson, namely, that by the cunning co-presence of two elements, which is throughout nature, whatever lames or paralyzes you draws in with it the divinity, in some form, to repay."¹⁹ Again, Emerson sees the world as an interworking of fate and the power of our minds. In this paragraph he suggests that each of the ill workings of fate upon us is, in a sense, gilt with the reminder that all is held together by the workings of fate. Fate condemns us to more or less follow the patterns of events which we are born into, but fate is also the source of continuity in the world. Fate is that "which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom/ to serve a universal end."²⁰ It is this notion which Emerson expresses in his repeated suggestion that we revere the "workings of 'Beautiful Necessity'"; necessity is both the force which binds us to our physical nature as well as the reminder that all is proceeding according to plans which are often beyond our comprehension.

In a sense, then, skepticism remains a state that we must pass through on our way into the temple of fate. We must first follow the skeptic in rejecting the natural inclinations of belief which will have us as radical spiritualists or materialists before we are able to see that indeed fate, in the form of the workings of nature, underlies all which happens in the world. On the other hand, it is a mistake to assume that Emerson answers the challenge to his skepticism simply by resolving on fate. Upon entering the temple of fate, skepticism is not

eliminated as it is moderated. The skeptical stance still remains as the force which impedes and challenges the progress of fate. This tension truly reflects Emerson's own deep commitment to naturalism. Looking into our world we may see the workings of fate and understand that the world is indeed beyond our comprehension. Emerson also sees the power of the human mind and the changes it makes in the same world. In a scheme which suggests Dewey's later notions of doing and undergoing.²¹ Emerson sees both the dramatic workings of Nature as well as the role of humans in the drama.

Emerson's answer to the challenge his son's death poses his idealism, then, is this blend of skepticism and reverent resignation to fate. It is an answer which surely does not yield the definitude which a traditional idealism would demand. It does not, in the end, simply reject the material world nor does it abandon the non-physical. It does, however, remain true to Emerson's commitment to finding the absolute in nature. An impoverished reading of the answers reached in "Threnody" would have Emerson as recycling a standard answer to the problem of evil in a Christian world view: the notion of a divine plan which accounts for suffering and which must be taken as an article of faith. Instead, Emerson's deeply naturalistic thinking searches the world around him for an answer to his anguish and doubt caused by the death of his son. The workings of nature, of which death is a part, are not arrived at by simple credulity, but by doubt and self-examination. The assurance that all proceeds according to a definite design is not conveyed by a secondary or tertiary source, but by direct experience itself: sight. Emerson, then, retains his naturalistic bent when he comes to a resolution of the doubt which his son's death brings.

NOTES

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960. 414.

² Emerson, "Nature," 24.

³ Emerson, "Skeptic," 295.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Emerson, "Threnody," 433.

¹³ Emerson, "Skeptic," 300.

¹⁴ Emerson, "Nature," 267.

¹⁵ Emerson, "Threnody," 434.

¹⁶ Emerson, "Fate," 336.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 351.

²¹ cf. *Art as Experience* pp. 44-50.