EMERSON AND THE LITERATURE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY IN ENGLAND

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In Emerson’s Journals, from the first volume to the last, one is impressed by the frequency of references to seventeenth century literature. Emerson refers not to one group of writers only, but to dramatists, lyric poets, preachers, religious philosophers, to works of highest genius as well as works which are recommended primarily by qualities common to all seventeenth century writing. His close familiarity with this literature is suggested also by the numerous quotations from it which form mottoes or provide an illustration for his finished essays and lectures. Quotations such as those preceding “Self Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” “Manners,” and “Heroism” suggest not merely Emerson’s familiarity with the poets of the seventeenth century, but also a very deep sympathy with the thoughts and feelings which he found expressed by them. What Emerson read was important to him. His critics agree that the art for which he had the deepest appreciation was literature. His lifelong devotion to English literature from the accession of Elizabeth to the death of Charles II therefore assumes a peculiar importance. In the present essay I shall examine the development of Emerson’s taste for seventeenth century literature, and indicate the sympathy which exists between some of his ideas and those of the earlier writers, or the agreement between his literary theories and their practice.

In order to understand Emerson’s early interest in seventeenth century writers, before he was acquainted with English Romantic criticism, we should remember the differences between the situation in America and in England. The artificiality of eighteenth century life in Europe was counteracted by pioneering conditions in America. Although parts of America enjoyed the refinements of European life, a “return to nature” would have lost in America much of its meaning because of the continuity of the pioneering tradition. In England there were innumerable monuments which stood as memorials of the Middle Ages, and which had a large part in stirring the imaginations of the Romantic artists. In the rural districts, traditions coming

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down from the Middle Ages had not really been broken. In America, on the other hand, no such monuments or traditions of a former culture existed. There were only the traditions of the Puritan pioneers of the seventeenth century, and a traditional regard for their contemporaries in England. The culture from which they came was represented by the literature of the seventeenth century. Conditions in America made it inevitable that literature should be of the greatest importance for any cultural revival. Only Americans who travelled had the opportunity to see the great achievements of the past in architecture, sculpture, and painting; and seeing them under such conditions is not like living among them. Music could have been more easily transported, but opportunities for hearing it in America were limited. Only the art of literature could circulate freely in the most remote localities.

Emerson's early interest in the writers of the seventeenth century may therefore be explained by his natural regard for the period when the religious tradition of the Puritans had greatest vitality. In the *Journal* for 1824, Emerson indicates an interest in the achievement of the Puritan tradition in England and America. "Few bodies or parties have served the world so well as the Puritans... The Puritans had done their duty to literature when they bequeathed it the *Paradise Lost* and *Comus*; to science, by ¹ to legislation, by ¹; to all the great interests of humanity, by planting the New World with their thrifty stock." ² Emerson here shows his consciousness of the fact that Milton was a Puritan, and was thus related to America. He also shows how his mind was occupied with the cultural achievement of the tradition which America inherited. He was so far able to point to its achievement in only two fields, but he anticipated learning from his further reading what the Puritans had contributed to science and to legislation.

Emerson's interest in the past was never antiquarian nor sentimental. Unlike some of his Romantic contemporaries in Europe, he was interested in the literature of the past because for him it was living. His reading of seventeenth century writers was independent of the English revival of interest in them. A cultural lag in America made a revival almost unnecessary. Emerson's early pronouncements on poetry illustrate his nearness to eighteenth century ideas when his contemporaries in England had generally abandoned them.

¹ These blanks were in the original.
He says in an early journal, "... there seems to be a tendency in the passions to clothe fanciful views of objects in beautiful language. It seems to consist in the pleasure of finding out a connection between a material image and a moral sentiment." ⁸ Here, as early as 1822, Emerson speculates on poetic images as "nothing but the striking occurrences selected from Nature and Art." ⁴ But, although he shows a conscious interest in the poetic image, his theory of its place in poetry and of its relation to nature is undeveloped. He does not conceive of a coalescence between the word and the thing. The poetic image is not the discovery of a relation which exists already, but the invention of a fanciful mind. Emerson’s mature theory of symbolism and poetry began to develop under the influence of his reading of seventeenth century writing, before he read Coleridge.⁵ His early familiarity with the works of Shakespeare and Milton and Marvell is suggested by a number of phrases which he uses in the journals for 1824 and 1826.⁶ And he was becoming aware of much more than their stylistic qualities which had first attracted him. In 1828, speaking of Herbert, Shakespeare, Marvell, Herrick, Milton, and Jonson, he says:

I have for them an affectionate admiration I have for nothing else. They set me on speculations. They move my wonder at myself. They suggest the great endowment of the spiritual man. They open glimpses of the heaven that is in the intellect. When I am caught by a magic word and drop the book to explore the infinite charm—to run along the line of that ray—I feel the longevity of the mind; I admit the evidence of the immortality of the soul.⁷

Emerson here displays a genuine feeling that seventeenth century literature is alive. He seems to be moving quite naturally towards a theory of the relation between the poetic imagination and ideal truth, the year before he began to read Coleridge. It is not surprising, therefore, that he found himself in sympathy with Coleridge’s poetic theories, especially the distinction, which he later makes his own, between Fancy and the Imagination.

As Emerson developed his theory of symbolism he turned continually for illustration to the poets of the seventeenth century, and

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³ *Journals*, I, 105.
⁴ *Journals*, I, 105.
⁵ Emerson first read Coleridge in 1829. See Frank T. Thompson, "Emerson’s Indebtedness to Coleridge," *Studies in Philology*, XXIII, 1.
⁷ *Journals*, II, 254.
among the prose writers he found a current of ideas on which his mind fed. When Cudworth, the Cambridge Platonist, wrote "there is as much reality in fancy and consciousness as there is in local motion," he was expressing an idea which Emerson was to apply to poetry. The poetic imagination is the faculty which perceives ideal truth. "Poetry, if perfected," Emerson writes, "is the only verity; is the speech of man after the real, and not after the apparent." This is a late expression of the idea which is behind that suggestive image in his first published work: "The whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind." Although Emerson was conscious of the implication of such an ideal doctrine, "that what we call Nature, the external world, has no real existence,—is only phenomenal," he does not accept this extreme view. The idea or symbol is the higher, but not the sole reality. The metaphor, or the symbol in general taken from nature, has the power of representing an idea because, Emerson says, this power is in nature: "All the facts in nature are nouns of the intellect, and make the grammar of the eternal language. Every word has a double, treble or centuple use and meaning." The natural fact is in truth a symbol, not for one idea, but for an infinite number of ideas. All may be true because of the central identity of mind and matter:

In nature, each individual symbol plays innumerable parts, as each particle of matter circulates in turn through every system. The central identity enables any one symbol to express successively all the qualities and shades of real being. In the transmission of the heavenly waters, every hose fits every hydrant.

Emerson significantly distinguished this conception of symbolism from religious mysticism which "nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false." It is the business of the poet constantly to create a new order out of things which have heretofore lain in disorder, to recognize new identities: "The poet who plays with . . . [the law of correspondence between mind and matter] with most boldness best justifies himself; is most profound and most devout." These ideas are fundamental in Emerson's conception of the imagination, which, as Santayana

8 Quoted by Basil Willey, Seventeenth Century Background, London, 1934, p. 155.
11 Letters and Social Aims, Works, VIII, 14.
12 Conduct of Life, Works, VI, 304.
13 Representative Men, Works, IV, 121.
14 Essays, Second Series, Works, III, 34.
15 Letters and Social Aims, Works, VIII, 10.
says, is really his single theme. No theory of poetry distinguishes better between the use of imagery in the seventeenth century and its use in the eighteenth century.

Emerson thought of the seventeenth century as "the richest period of the English mind." "Since the constellation of great men who appeared in Greece in the time of Pericles, there was never any such society." In the literature of that time, from the accession of Queen Elizabeth to the death of Charles II, "the English language has its teeth and bones and muscles largest and strongest." He appreciates the strength which the language derived from its nearness to the living speech: "there is greater freedom, less affectation, greater emphasis, bolder figure and homelier idiom than in books of the same classes at the present day." The sensitiveness to language illustrated here plays an important part in Emerson’s enjoyment of seventeenth century poetry, despite his theoretical depreciation of formal qualities. Emerson admired different qualities represented by the different traditions of seventeenth century poetry. In the Metaphysical poets he found the best illustrations for his theory of symbolism. In them images are drawn from widely divergent experience and new identities propounded with most boldness. "'T is a good mark of any genius," Emerson writes, "a single novel expression of the identity." And for an example he quotes a characteristic line of Donne:

That one would almost say her body thought.

Emerson felt that the recognition of identities of this kind was genuine insight; Cowley and Donne he thought of as philosophers. "To their insight there is no trifle, but philosophy or insight is so much the habit of their minds that they can hardly see, as a poet should, the beautiful forms and colors of things." To read Donne with this kind of seriousness is undoubtedly to make a truer reading than to read him as an ingenious contriver of fantastic metaphors and similes, the natural approach of one educated according to the literary standards of the eighteenth century. Emerson read Herbert also with this seriousness and admired his formal successes in the use of rhythm or rhyme. It is the heat of thought which explains to him Herbert’s complete success with a difficult measure.
The lyric poems of Ben Jonson and his followers, especially Herrick, Emerson appreciated, though they lack the “weight” of the Metaphysical poets. “Herrick’s merit is in the simplicity and manliness of his utterance, and only rarely the weight of his sentences.”  

The beauty of Ben Jonson’s songs, which Emerson called the best in English poetry, is the “natural manly grace of a robust workman.”

A third tradition of seventeenth century poetry, the one which includes Spenser and Milton, is neither distinguished by Metaphysical boldness in the perception of identities, nor by the grace of the Cavalier lyric poets. Emerson seems to be conscious of this difference in Milton when he writes: “Milton was too learned... It wrecked his originality. He was more indebted to the Hebrew than even to the Greek.” Although Emerson recognizes the literary power of Milton, his greatest admiration was not for Milton’s poetry, but for his moral earnestness, his “power to inspire.” “Virtue goes out of him into others.” In the essay on Milton, Emerson is occupied primarily with Milton’s character. Like Emerson, Milton had concerned himself with the moral interpretation of nature, “to raise the idea of Man.”

It was in the seventeenth century that the medieval conceptions of nature had become so generally questioned that the “new Philosophic” began to influence the thoughts and feelings of ordinary men. Emerson draws an analogy between the change which took place in men’s minds about the time of James I, and a similar change which he noticed in the development of American literature. He was thinking primarily of the change in religious attitude; a “melioration,” which meant an attitude more marked by “good sense” and tolerance. The new conception of nature had effected in the seventeenth century a change in the attitude to religion. The relation between the new science and the old religious ideas is fundamental in representative writers like Bacon and Browne. Both of these writers are reconcilers of religious ideas and the new scientific thought. Hobbes, on the other hand, accepted the materialistic view of the universe without reserve, but he was opposed by certain Puritan theologians at Cambridge who turned to Plato for their support. Emerson affirmed

24 Journals, III, 483.
26 Ibid.
27 Journals, III, 328.
28 “He cast... [his native tongue] into new forms,” “Milton,” Works, XII, 260.
29 “Milton,” Works, XII, 253.
30 Ibid., p. 254.
spiritual reality, just as the Cambridge Platonists did, at a time when those who would live in the spirit needed some support. He was as unreconcilable to medieval dogmatism as Bacon. In Emerson’s day there was no need to justify science; and yet Emerson could justify it to his own satisfaction only when the scientist looked beyond the mere fact to its moral significance. When Matthew Arnold wanted to sum up Emerson’s contribution to literature he called him the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit.\(^{32}\)

A form in which Platonism was popular in the seventeenth century was in the conception of man as a universe, or the universe as an organism, the idea of microcosm and macrocosm. It occurs again and again in the poets as well as in Browne, Bacon, and Hobbes, and it is an idea which Emerson felt to be satisfying. “What a joyful sense of freedom we have,” he writes, “... when Plato calls the world an animal, and Timaeus affirms that the plants also are animals; or affirms a man to be a heavenly tree, growing with his root, which is the head, upward.”\(^{33}\) Emerson then quotes the use of this idea by Chapman. In the *Journals*, similar thoughts are noticed in poems of Herbert, Donne, and Daniel.\(^{34}\) Mr. G. P. Conger points out that as the seventeenth century progressed the idea of man as a microcosm was accepted rather as an illustrative metaphor than as a philosophical doctrine.\(^{35}\) The theory, however, meant more than this to the early Metaphysical poets and to Emerson.

Herbs gladly cure our flesh because that they
Find their acquaintance there.

“This is mystically true,” Emerson comments. “Man is only a piece of the universe made alive.”\(^{36}\) As we have seen, Emerson looks upon Cowley and Donne as philosophers. Indeed, he is likely to call any “true poet” a philosopher. A poet is by nature a Platonic philosopher and a Platonist is by nature a poet. This intimate relationship is suggested by the similarity of phrase which Emerson uses in speaking of the Platonist and the poet. Of Shakespeare he says, “He never appears the anatomist,”\(^{37}\) a metaphor which he had used before in speaking of the Platonic philosophy: “it is imaginative and not anatomical.”\(^{38}\) It is the imaginative power of both poets and philosophers which Emerson considers true philosophic insight.


\(^{34}\) *Journals*, II, 347–348.

\(^{35}\) G. P. Conger, *Theories of Macrocosms and Microcosms*, New York, 1922, p. 68.

\(^{36}\) *Journals*, VII, 104. The quotation is from Herbert’s “Man.”

\(^{37}\) *Journals*, VIII, 154.

\(^{38}\) *Journals*, VII, 8.
But more direct use of Platonism in the seventeenth century is made by the Cambridge theologians whose purpose it was to refute the materialistic theories of Hobbes. They affirmed the truth of the spiritual world, not with any hostility toward scientific inquiry, nor by denying the real existence of matter, but by affirming, like Emerson, the higher reality of spirit. Emerson did not separate the current of ideas in the seventeenth century from the literary use of those ideas. He admired the writings of Bacon and Browne and Cudworth primarily for their quality as literature. But this admiration was at the same time partly based upon a strain of Platonism which he felt to be in Elizabethan literature as a whole. A philosophy of idealism, he thought, provided a current of ideas with great artistic promise. He was conscious of this when he read Cudworth:

Cudworth is an armoury for a poet to furnish himself withal. He should look at every writer in that light and read no poor book. Why should the poet bereave himself of the sweetest as well as the grandest thoughts by yielding deference to the miserly, indigent unbelief of this age, and leaving God and moral nature out of his catalogue of beings.

It is to be observed here that Emerson was associating Cudworth’s ideas with the achievement of the seventeenth century poets.

Difficult as it is to recognize a genuine affinity between an individual and the mind of a past age, the numerous attractions for Emerson of the literature of the seventeenth century must suggest an affinity which goes beneath external connections. The rejection of medieval dogmatism and the acceptance of scientific criteria for truth do not appeal peculiarly to Emerson; they are the foundation of modern civilization. But the co-existence in the seventeenth century of older traditions, the rooted belief in the spiritual world, and the intermixture of Platonic doctrines in the inherited Christianity, did not repel Emerson, but attracted him. Finally, the conflict between the new and the old ideas produced a great imaginative literature written in a language close to its roots in nature; and the need for a moral interpretation of science, and for a reaffirmation of spiritual truth brought forth works of a moral and spiritual nature. These cross-currents in seventeenth century literature produced what Emerson considered to be “the head of human poetry.”

40 Journals, IV, 8.
41 Journals, II, 253.