

Rural and Urban Life: an Emersonian Reconciliation

I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both.

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Journals*, March, 1844

At the beginning of the nineteenth century America was changing. Improvements in land routes and the construction of canals and railroads led to the emergence of a national market. As Michael T. Gilmore points out in his study *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, cities expanded even faster than the population of the country as a whole, ensuring large concentrated markets for foodstuffs and consumer goods. Statistics convey some of these changes: between 1820 and 1860, the population grew from about 10 million to almost 32 million while the proportion of Americans dwelling in cities rose by 800 percent (GILMORE 1988: 2).

At the same time, writing and publishing developed along the same line as the economy. During the next decades significant changes occurred in the production, circulation and status of literature. Paper-making processes improved and it became possible to produce books in larger editions and at lower prices. Railroads also removed many of the obstacles to distribution, linking up the different regions of the country (GILMORE 1988: 3).

Emerson announced that America was a country for the future because it was a country of beginnings, projects and expectations as he proclaims in his essay "Circles":

The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to draw a new circle (EMERSON 1981: 240).

Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series (EMERSON 1981: 230).

... Every end is a beginning (EMERSON 1981: 228).

Having these ideas in mind, most Americans began to regard the urban development as a sign of prosperity and success. There was a great increase in American urbanisation and consequently a developing industrialisation. The Northeast of America experienced substantial growth in population.

This extension of the market was felt by the writers of this epoch. On the one hand, they were willing to accommodate themselves to the imperatives of writing for the mass public. On the other hand, the sense of tension and duality in these writer's response to the marketplace can also be seen in their feelings about popularity. Emerson, for example, feels the need to sell because of financial security. Yet he also shows disdain for the "noisy readers of the hour" which did not prevent him from hoping to appeal to both audiences, the many as well as the selected few. Once again, as Michael T. Gilmore emphasises, Emerson's rejoinder reveals a disposition on his own part to please the public: "Who would not like to write something which all can read, like Robinson Crusoe? And who does not see with regret his page is not solid with materialistic treatment that designers everybody?" (GILMORE 1988: 9).

However, in his journals Emerson expresses quite a different opinion, which reveals that his true feelings were against the needs of the growing economy and marketplace:

Happy is he who looks only into his work to know if it will succeed, never into the times or the public opinion; and who writes from the love of imparting certain thoughts and not from the necessity of sale – who writes always to the *Unknown Friend* (EMERSON 1995: 231).

As it is often suggested, Emerson is usually taken as a model of an author holding a certain kind of anti-urban feeling. Apparently, what Emerson seems to defend in *Nature* (as many of his contemporary authors do) is that men needed to withdraw from the rural environment in order to achieve a more meaningful life.

However, as James L. Machor points out in his study *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America*, there is an antagonism in this concept which leads us to the idea that, actually, most of the mid-nineteenth century authors found excitement and even more opportunity in life in the city. When we read some passages in Emerson's journals this idea is clearly expressed:

Rest on your humanity, and it will supply you with strength and hope and vision for the day. Solitude and the country, books, and hopeness, will feed you; but go into the city... (EMERSON 1995: 264).

Home from Chicago and Milwaukee. Chicago grows so fast that one ceases to respect civic growth: as if all these solid and stately squares which we are wont to see as the slow growth of a century had come to be done by machinery as cloth and hardware are made....

'Twas tedious, this squalor and obstructions of travel; the advantage of their offers at Chicago made it necessary to go... (EMERSON 1995: 310).

According to these journal passages it seems clear enough that what Emerson seems to suggest is that towns exist to produce something useful to the public benefits. Nevertheless, when we first approach *Nature* we apparently come to the conclusion that Emerson only really looks for a genuine relation between men and the material world and it seems that this connection can only be achieved as long as men live in solitude in nature. It is true that for Emerson, solitude was something inevitably necessary if a man really wanted to find his inner and real self. Also, the idea of living only and completely in harmony with nature seems to be clear enough, especially if we pay close attention to following well-known statement written in *Nature*:

Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by blithe air and into infinitive space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; The currents of the universe circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God... to be brothers, to be acquaintances; master of servant, is then a trifle and disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty (EMERSON 1981: 11).

Emerson was trying to reconstruct an original relation between man and the universe, so this "transparent eyeball" metaphor leads the author to a personal experience in which he describes what he had to go through in order to find his real and inner self, that means, the transcendental state.

From this "bare ground" – which seems infinite to Emerson – he is able to look at the whole society and, therefore, this infinite space allows him to get free from all the material aspects in life. He also concludes that the forces of nature do not only exist in that specific place in the country but also in the whole society, which is unable to see them. What Emerson tries to show is that the individual conscience creates a social conscience and consequently, a collective will to act. As he says in the essay "Experience":

...Up again, old heart! – it seems to say – there is victory yet for all justice.... The world exists to realise... the transformation of genius into practical power (EMERSON 1981: 290).

Nevertheless, we must bear in mind Emerson's reflections on his journals and here we soon realise that the city can also be seen as a means of opportunity. Emerson believes that the complete individual must not reject society but participate in it. There must be a union between these two antagonistic concepts: nature and city. As Lewis Mumford puts it in *The City in History*:

The city... not merely held together a larger body of people and institutions than any other kind of community, but it maintained and transmitted a larger portion of their lives.... The city, as Emerson well observed, "lives by remembering" (MUMFORD 1961: 98).

This author also notes that Emerson, as early as 1836, identified the great potentiality of the new scale of time and place: that it would turn roads into streets, and transform regions into neighborhoods (MUMFORD 1961: 430).

Notwithstanding, the concept of solitude remains a true fact. To Emerson a man must be alone if he really wants to find the essence of his being, which is the only true and real journey that a man can make during his life: the journey to the inner self and at the same time, the journey to God. And to be able to do this, one must be alone, whether in the city or in harmony with nature. It is not a geographical matter but an inner and transcendental one. This is an idea shared by other authors in the epoch of the American Renaissance, such as Walt Whitman, who would also regard both the city and the country as a valuable fact to the development of the American nation and to the importance of finding the way to the inner self and, therefore, to the national identity. In the poem "Song of the Open Road", Whitman clearly expresses these ideas:

A foot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

...
You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is
here,
I believe that much unseen is also here.

...
You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides!
I believe you are latent with unseen existences, you are so dear to me.

You flagg'd walks of the cities! You strong curbs at the edges!
You ferries! You planks and posts of wharves! You timber lined sides!
you distant ships! (WHITMAN 1995: 136-137).

The impulse that drove Whitman to his self-discovery was also observable in the America of those times and in many other authors such as Emerson. Whitman's main wish was to renew himself and his own life. He needed nothing more than discovering his essential life and living in it. What Whitman really wanted was that people could see the world for what it was and that they should simplify their lives as much as possible, in order to see and perceive it with a new clarity.

Whitman, like Emerson, also points out the aim to create an urban-pastoral society with new and more organic cities. As Burton Pike writes in his study *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*:

On the one hand, there is the visible city of streets and buildings... On the other hand, there are the subconscious currents arising in the minds of the city living inhabitants from his combination of past and present (PIKE 1981: 4).

The "self" that Whitman celebrated had something in common with Emerson, which means that according to their views, all societies are constructed as long as the individuals freely choose to ally themselves for a common benefit and, at the same time, they assert their individual rights and identities. In the essay "The Conduct of Life", Emerson describes an optimistic involvement in an age of road building and the growing of science and engineering and its implications for the creation of a new America:

Whilst we want cities as the centres where the best things are found, cities degrade us by magnifying trifles (EMERSON 1964: 729).

... If one shall read the future of the race hinted in the organic effort of nature... we shall there affirm that there is nothing he will not overcome and convert.... He will convert the furies into Muses, and the hells into benefit (EMERSON 1964: 736).

In the same essay, Emerson emphasises the idea that a country boy finds the town as his chance and opportunity. We can conclude that for Emerson one of the advantages of the rail roads is to unite town and country life:

A man was born, not for prosperity, but to suffer for the benefit of others, like the noble rock-maple tree which all around the villages bleeds for the service man. Not praise, not men's acceptance of our doing, but the spirit's holy errand through us, absorbed the thought. How dignified is this!... how all that is called talents and worth in Paris and in Washington... (EMERSON 1964: 161).

In this passage from his journals, once again, Emerson outlines that towns exist to produce something important to the public benefits. Like millions of other Americans, he wished to live freely and without commitments but he also thought that this same freedom was needed in order to achieve material success.

Henry David Thoreau, one of Emerson's strong followers and, who was apparently in total connection with his thoughts, on this subject seems to defend a radical and different point of view. Michael T. Gilmore also notes that Thoreau objected vigorously to Emerson's attitude towards the need to sell and although he refused to make concessions to public taste (unlike Hawthorne and Melville), he wanted to influence the thinking of his countryman and to reach as many people as possible through his lectures and writing, even though he was in constant need of money (GILMORE 1988: 10). Starting with Emerson's basic ideas and concepts, Thoreau decides to really live a life in harmony with nature.

Thoreau was drawn to the transcendentalists attitudes concerning the necessity of cultivating one's self. In Thoreau's mind, intellectual growth and spiritual development were the only true methods of social reform and development. The true reform was discovering the divinity within one's self. Thoreau followed Emerson in locating God within one's soul and in nature. Emerson's *Nature* constituted Thoreau's language with which he could build a spiritual way of life, which he would really experiment and then describe in his book *Walden*. Consequently, on July 4, Thoreau went to live for two years in Walden Pond. The date he chose to withdraw from society was quite a meaningful one. It represents the country's independence and choosing this date Thoreau was probably trying to show his own independence from society and from the material world. This same inner self-independence had already been

proclaimed by Emerson in his first book *Nature* and with his address "The American Scholar", which completely influenced Thoreau.

The next passage from *Walden* shows us the idea of living in harmony with the world of nature, something also already described by Emerson in *Nature*, more precisely in the moment when he uses the "transparent eyeball" metaphor to express his feelings towards the universe. Thoreau reflects:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me (THOREAU 1986: 174).

In *Walden* Thoreau describes his life at the pond and he expresses positive feelings and confidence. In this environment he feels himself as part of nature and he is able to shed imposed social norms in order to discover an essential self not dependent on other's opinions, prejudices or tradition. Thoreau's essential self is nature's self. He must feel free and, at the same time, autonomous, which is symbolic of an infinitive spiritual independence that, according to him, all human beings should have. In *Walden* Thoreau writes about himself, about his life in harmony with nature, about his sense of freedom and he also describes how he managed to survive and do everything all by himself. Like Emerson, Thoreau also defends the idea of solitude and he really puts it in practice:

I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will (THOREAU 1986: 180-181).

The original relation between men and the material world that Emerson had already described in *Nature* is now found by Thoreau. He really experiments and puts in practice Emerson's basic ideas and he thinks that, only this way, will he be able to achieve his inner spiritual growth and discipline. Only this way will he be able to find God within himself. This is his own reform, which will lead him to the discovery of his true essence:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; ... he will live with the license of a higher order of beings (THOREAU 1986: 372).

When we read this passage we are obviously reading Emerson's ideas. In this sense, Thoreau not only built his cabin on Emerson's land, Walden Pond, but he also built all his thought based on Emerson's ideas. *Walden* shows Thoreau's spiritual growth found during his two-year stay in the country. What Thoreau really wanted to show was that men can really be self-sufficient and that life in the country is the only good thing that one can have.

According to him, urban development is completely unnecessary. Only here can we find a contradiction between Emerson and Thoreau. As it was said before, Emerson is usually taken as a model of an author holding a certain kind of anti-urban feeling. However, and as I have been trying to prove, what Emerson really seeks is a reconciliation between these two different worlds: country and city. I would say that this "anti-urban feeling" is more appropriate of Henry David Thoreau than of Emerson.

When Emerson wrote in his diary: "I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish. I find with chagrin that I cannot have both" (EMERSON 1995: 208), the desire of reconciliation between both country and city life was obvious. Emerson simply did not know how to achieve both of them. This sense of duality is something that is usually present in Emerson. The same happened when he had to face the problem of the marketplace. On the one hand, he needed to write for a mass public in order to earn money. On the other hand, he wanted to keep faithful to his principles and write only what he wanted and to "The Unknown Friend". This is not to say that Emerson cannot achieve what he wants. On the contrary, I would say that after reflecting on the subject Emerson can easily find many different reasons to reconcile country and city. Many of these reasons and apparent contradictions have already been stated before. This apparently contradictory idea of reconciliation between urban and country landscape might be quite easy to understand, especially if we look back at the basic concepts of the Emersonian thought.

Emerson often emphasised the need to discover the organic harmony between things, that means, for him a man should cultivate a spiritual and moral relationship within himself. However, Emerson also believed in the theory of correspondence, according to which every visible creation has a straight relation to another spiritual one in the world of the archetypes, in the world above. Therefore, the city could also be seen as a visible creation and a representation of the invisible world.

The most important reason for trying to achieve this reconciliation between country and city life is that the Emersonian thought is always looking for an organic union between things in the universe. Emerson believes that there is a divine power, which permeates every atom of the universe and that unchanging nature of that power determines every detail of human life and the natural world. Emerson believes that the universe and everything in it form a single, unified and organic system, which is the expression of the universal soul, the ONE, which also meant God. For Emerson, God was understood as an abstract power. In this sense, the material universe was created by the universal soul and faith in this soul was the key to every fulfilment. When one recognises the universal soul in all persons and events, then one is enlightened, that is, that one lives in the light, he will go through life with a sense of security.

As Emerson says in his essay "The Over-Soul":

That Unity, that Over-Soul within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; ... within man is the soul of the whole ... to which every part and particle is equally related; the Eternal One. We see the world peace by peace ... but the whole ... is the soul (EMERSON 1981: 210-211).

According to Emerson, each of us is potentially a microcosm of the relation between the universal soul and the universe and the main challenge in life is to realise that potential as fully as possible. The key to this challenge is the idea that God is in everyone and everything – God is within ourselves. The more one recognises these truths, the more one becomes self-reliant. A self-reliant man will fulfil the divine potential within himself:

All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light, is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the

intellect and the will; is the background of our being From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all (EMERSON 1981: 211).

The essence of the Emersonian thought is the idea that each man is able to achieve the universal soul and consequently the whole of the universe. Spiritual growth and self development are within everybody and the greatest aim in life is to find the divine spirit in ourselves and try to find out where it will take us. Emerson believed that each individual human soul was a passage to the universal soul. In this sense, everything in life is in harmony with nature and the universe is an organic whole, where everyone and everything have its special place and function. Even though, in a different way, this idea is also interestingly expressed by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*:

... I know that I have felt it again and again: the great buildings of civilisation; the meeting places; the libraries and theatres, the towers and domes; and often more moving than these, the houses, the streets, the press and excitement of so many people, with so many purposes... but this is not an experience at all... until it has come to include also the dynamic movement.... I say also "This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?" (WILLIAMS 1994: 6-7).

Having located an organic nexus between the Emersonian basic concepts and thoughts, I would say that for him, the city was necessary to counterbalance the effects of the country. For Emerson himself rural life in Concord village was not enough, as he expressed in his journals "Solitude and the country, books, and openness, will feed you; but go into the city... (EMERSON 1995: 264). We can, therefore, conclude that city and nature are inevitably linked. The necessary thing is to create an organic harmony between both of them. As Emerson says in *Nature*:

Every universal truth which we express in words implies or supposes every other truth. *Omne verum vero consonat*. It is like a great circle on a sphere, comports all possible circles (EMERSON 1981: 31).

Within the scope of the Emersonian thought, nature is a discipline which teaches men the importance of words as means to express an infinite knowledge. Emerson also emphasises that the

laws of nature are the real moral laws because nature is the symbol of the spirit. Nature teaches men everything and in this sense the material world can be seen as an inferior copy of the spiritual. However, and according to the theory of correspondence, there is always a close relation between the material and the spiritual world.

Emerson's attitude towards country and city reflected his philosophy of intellect and the importance of the difference between reason and understanding. James L. Machor in *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America*, quotes Emerson and emphasises this idea:

"The city delights the understanding" he wrote, because both are "made up of finities short, sharp, mathematical lines, all calculable." "In country", on the other hand, "with its unbroken horizon" is "the school of the reason" (MACHOR 1987: 159).

Therefore, as Emerson believed both in the existence of reason and understanding, so did he believe in the need of the city to counter-balance the country.

Furthermore, Emerson also believed in the power of language as a means to create a correspondence between the material and the spiritual world. In his address "The American Scholar" and in his essay "The Poet", Emerson defends that the scholar and the poet must be able to reunite the material and the spiritual world. Accordingly, we can conclude that the scholar and the poet should be able to reconcile both the city and the country, that is, the material and the spiritual aspects of life.

Warren I. Susman in "The City in American Culture" also emphasises this reconciliation giving particular attention to the idea that, for Emerson, the main value of this process is always metaphysical and never material:

While Emerson does not commit himself to an urban existence, he does argue that towns *ought* to exist for *intellectual* purposes, to harbour art and music, so that the public may reap the benefits.... Emerson makes it absolutely clear that no one can be fully a person, in the sense, without the city (WARREN 1997: 261).

As James L. Machor points out, this image of reconciliation has been a recurrent feature in American Literature and when Emerson wrote: "the test of our civilisation is the power of drawing the most benefit out of cities" (MACHOR 1987:5), he was expressing the idea that

the city was a valuable factor in the individual and national development.

Some writers in this epoch feared that a great urbanisation could threaten America's position as nature's nation. In fact, while some felt that increasing urbanisation was dangerous for the pastoral ideals of America, others were more hopeful. Those who were in favour of urbanisation defended the idea that urban development was part of a natural pattern for producing a balance between country and city. James L. Machor also notes that: "They asserted that the nation's urban development was consonant with rural values and with themes of America uniqueness and nature's ascendancy" (MACHOR 1987: 123).

For Emerson and, even though he would often regard the growing urbanisation a "little wild" (EMERSON 1995:156) in their projects to make new communities and remake old ones, he could not deny the need for principles in which the Americans could give their greatest strength and, therefore, achieve their social union. What really interested Emerson was an efficient social union and action in order to create and develop a new and strong intellectual America.

Emerson believed that the needs of the individual and the needs of society were part of one dynamic process, which properly synchronised, could lead to the real social development and benefit. Even though, he continued to value the solitude of the rural landscape, he also believed that only a union of the two could provide the means for a full character. Emerson had come to believe that the truly individual must not reject society but fully participate in it (MACHOR 1987: 158).

For Emerson the urban environment was able to provide men and artists, in particular, with more useful and positive conditions. He viewed cities as "literary vehicles by which he could relate the external and the internal, the actual and the ideal" (EMERSON 1981:241). We can, therefore, conclude that he, in the end, expressed the belief that the city had a very meaningful role in the social and cultural conditions of America. What Emerson really suggests is the idea of reconciliation between city and nature, between rural and urban landscape. After all and, as Burton Pike says:

"The city... is a human artefact which has become an object in the world of nature" (PIKE 1981: 3).

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