

Emerson: Sceptic and Pessimist

Benjamin De Casseres

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“You are spinning like bubbles in a river, you know not whither or whence, and you are bottomed and capped and wrapped in delusions,” says Emerson in his essay on Montaigne. The universe at any given moment is but a dissolving state of consciousness. Behind the arras of dreams there stands a Dreamer, and that there is a Dreamer and a dream are all the sceptic can affirm. Scepticism is a system of arriving at provisional universals by skipping the particular. It holds to no thing, but affirms an All. As a particle of salt is dissolved in water so is a particular fact dissolved in its eternal Idea in the mind of the sage. Your object standing there in space, tangible and movable, has no more substantiality than the gorgeous color-bands woven by sunken autumn suns. They are part and parcel of the cosmic mirage. All things seen are but projections of the seer; all truths are aspects of the Truth; each brain is a facet of the Universal Mind. The universe itself is but an arc of the uncurled eternal.

The arch-sceptic is the arch-believer. He may smile indulgently at all your facts ranged neatly in their pigeonholes; but there is a Fact at which he will not smile. He is awed by himself. He will not believe his eyes because there is an unlidded Eye within his soul that sweeps the eternal spaces. He will not believe his ears because there ring upon the spiritual tympanum the whispered vibrations of a Law that is not dependent on the atom. He believes little in the rule of thumb and finger. Two and two may make four-and-an-eighth in Jupiter. An extra cerebral convolution might have made it so here on this planet.

The “order” of the world is an order built of chance. Did the reverse hold true of every objective universal law we would as dogmatically assert the “fixed order” of things; and we would get along just as well—or better—or worse. Our reasonings are but expressions of character; or divinations are related to temperament and our widest scientific generalization is but the orbit of the strongest sun-midge. Processes are eternal; facts are the ephemera of Time. Emerson held to the Processes; what the Processes promulgated he spurned. Our speech is mere cavil. No action is whole and completed. Our real thoughts are untongued. The heart has no lips. Our passions are but the jagged shards of an earthen vessel broken by too much usage. We are doomed to the unutterable. There is repetition, but no “order” in the universe. Up the steep Matterhorn of these negations the sceptic soul of Emerson toiled till it reached the pinnacle—the Oversoul that canopies all negations; the Oversoul, that is unarithmetical and may not be numbered. There he dwells to this day—like the pinnacle of Mont Blanc, “still, snowy, and serene.”

“Life is a bubble and a skepticism,” he says in a passionate paragraph. Things reel and sway and pass beyond the senses in the minute. Men lay snares for the Present and are caught in their own traps. Youth girds itself for a battle that is never fought; manhood dreams of an old age that never comes; childhood is best enjoyed when ’t is past. The descent from anticipation to realization is sheer, and our actions are rounded by a leer. Like Faust, we shall all be damned when we bid the present moment stay, and we are damned if we bid it go: Rest is stagnation; motion is dispersive. We are lost either way. If you are as coarse as Belial or as ethereal as Shelley you are doomed to doubt.

Systems, codes, conventions, moralities are put forth in trust and faith from the larval brain of man, and Time grinds them to smut. As the aspiring flame from Hecla’s crater is lost in the pits of night, so are our highest exaltations lost in the swash of the durations. Nothing is fixed. All things are travailing at birth or are entering on the death-spasm. Nothing that is born or dies can be final, and that which is not final is not true. The temporal order is apparitional. Governments are organized instincts—and instincts are sexual and stomachic. That which stands through eternal change, and this, too, is tethered to the inner man.

“Time melts to shining ether the solid angularity of facts,” says the great Transcendentalist. And this applies to moral as well as to physical facts. A proper perspective shatters differences. Good and evil differ in time and clime. Shall I choose this or this?—and how shall I know that that which I chose is true? What is right in Constantinople is wrong in New York. Cain and Mary of Magdala are necessary ingredients in cosmic economy. Evil and good are spiritual systole and diastole. There is a vice slumbering in every virtue. Comparative sociology tends to weaken the safeguards which conscience imposes. Time melts scruples, and the conscience of twenty is not the conscience of sixty. Patriotism depends on the accident of birth. If a man is born in a stable is he bound to ride horse all the days of his life? Theft is a matter of numbers: there are statues to Napoleon, but none to Jack Cade. Civilization is the closet where we hide the racial skeleton. Time shall melt New York City to a moral fable. Our vices are ancient virtues; virtues, vices that shall be. Altruism is a subtle mode of achieving egoistic ends. Self-sacrifice is the oblation of self to Self. Religion is a mood, and philosophy temperament intellectualized.

A history of human opinion would be a history of mankind’s errors. The Galilean system is no whit better than the Ptolemaic. There is an increment of mystery—that is all. What difference does it make whether the earth goes around the sun or the sun goes around the earth if we have not solved the mystery of motion? What difference does it make whether matter is an expression of mind or mind an expression of matter if we can define neither term? The gods of the peoples are metamorphic, and scarab and Jove are but names. The telescope of Galileo increased the distance between us and the stars. Microscope, retort, and crucible are not as useful as flint and spear and battle-axe.

Each brain is a premise, and what you believe, that is so. Civilization boasts that it has given us social order and humanized us, when in reality it has but subtilized the various forms of aggression. All things tend to complexity and perplexity. The simpler a thing is the nearer is it to perfection. The Black Fellow can realize his ideals. Lord Byron could not. Highly elaborated aspirations. Simple natures start from simple premises, and a highly complex civilization is but a device for increasing human ills.

Emerson tells us that society never advances or recedes. It forever stands. He is sceptical of all “progress.” In “Compensation” he riddles the Occident’s pet illusion. The Eastern sage repeats the syllable “Om” a thousand times and is self-hypnotized. The Western gascon bawls “Progress”

and is hallucinated by the idea that he is moving in a straight line. There is social dilatation, but “progress” is but jabberwocky. Mankind is like a blind horse travelling around a circus ring. To acquire “knowledge”—in its Western sense—is a process of sharpening the claws the better to grip your fellow-man’s throat in the competitive struggle. We all stand in our places in the great Spelling Bee, and he who can spell the greatest number of words correctly is elected chief bushwhacker.

If you pursue things Time will devour you; if you stand still, you will devour Time. Emerson’s law of compensation tallies with that profound saying of Seneca’s, “For it is all one not to desire and to have.” This is the essence of scepticism. It denies that any one thing is better than another, and affirms the identity of opposites. Rest on the Oversoul and watch the water-flies flit over the darkling currents of life. Bid no thing go; bid no thing stay; welcome the good and bad—and stand still. Action is founded on fear—the fear of one’s self, the fear of silence, the fear of being alone. Action is an opiate, not a stimulant—it drugs the introspective self. Those who sleep, dream, meditate, achieve all that action unconsciously aims at and never attains—peace, calm, the lustral redemption. Mould hope and fear and you enter the realm of the sage. The particular no longer usurps, and life in the supersensible begins. Opinions become brain-myths and “forward,” “backward” and “progress” the patois of fish-women.

The scepticism of the mystic is born of the idea that all things eventually flow back to their sources. The ages have solved nothing. The same fundamental problems that confronted Æschylus confront Ibsen. The soul of Plotinus is revived in Maeterlinck. Œdipus and Hamlet were undone by the same baleful, inscrutable Fate. Job’s piercing shrieks were echoed back from the mouth of Manfred on the heights of the Jungfrau. The sublime vision that overcame Buddha amid his purple sins sublimated the soul of Tolstoy, and the furies that lashed Orestes with serpent whips scourged Oscar Wilde to his doom. Marriage, society, government are still open questions. Imago or butterfly—the spirit persists forever. You cannot leash the spirit of Emerson to a system, nor hitch his star to a hackney-coach.

Pessimism is a sublimated, transcendental optimism. The pessimist’s ideals are so high that he will not—cannot—conform his spirit to this world—the drifting cinder of a burned-up Asgard. Pure optimism is cerebral vacuity tempered by a stomach.

Emerson disbelieved in the temporal order. Like all the mighty brotherhood, he was at war with the petty and the transitory. In the realm of Space, Time, and Circumstance the worst always happens because the bond-servants of the triple chain are always hoping for the best. “The Transcendentalists” was a lecture delivered at the Masonic Temple, Boston, in January, 1842. It is the great challenge to things as they are. It is not the challenge of the sceptic, but the challenge of the pessimist. It breathes the positiveness of all negations. What is worthy? asks Emerson. Your charities are sycophantic, your governments but organized theft, your civilizations “a long train of felonies,” and your boasted virtues but sleazy vices.

Life is a degradation, and man lives in the slime-pits of unholy lusts. “Much of our labor seems mere waiting; it was not that we were born for.” His thought is that of Buddha, the Man of Galilee, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Plato, Amiel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche. These have all agreed, in diverse ways, on the essential sordidness of practical life. Life on the terms given us is an insult to the soul of man. Hurry us from this “Iceland of negations” into newer, deeper infinitudes, past these mephitic atmospheres! How came we to Molokai? We are the “butt-ends of men,” the tailings of gods, celestial sawdust, leavings of past devilttries. I will none of it, cries our Hamlet of the white tunic in sublime disdain.

Nor could that subtle-seeing eye be deluded by the vesture of things. "Thou ailest here, and here," said Goethe, sticking his finger into mankind's age-long sores. And thou rottest all over, said Emerson. These mechanical inventions—the gewgaws of a senescent race—will all be destroyed and leave posterity with as little knowledge of them as we have of the lost arts of Egypt, a civilization that is not yet cold in death. The seas shall sob their litanies over the places where you now higgle and haggle for your dole. Your temples and shrines shall become sun-food, and you shall sooner count the stars than number the nothings of daily speech.

Things will be neither better nor worse in times to come; they will be both. The balances are always kept. Evil will never grow less so long as men will cling to the temporal order. Ixion is bound to his wheel, and while the wheel goes round there is no help for man. The things that are tangible are the things that are evil. Good is a negation. Transcendentalism is a negative good. It aims to release the individual. In the Spent Dynamic alone is there hope. On the crest of the final equilibration will man find rest. Life is a series of undulations, and "illusion is God's method." Facts are mere bell-buoys on the stream of infinite being. Transcendental pessimism seeks another order.

The equilibration that Emerson dreamed of—is it aught but a wraith on the storm-billows? All motion tends to equilibration; yet a state of equilibration cannot be preserved; motion begins again. And so are we played upon. The Pythagorean Harmony, the Spencerian Equilibration, the Emerson Oversoul—are they identical?

But we will wait. Patience. Our work is not here, and the sidereal days are not for us. Passion born of fire, and thought born of pain, and beauty born of sex, and death born of life mean nothing to us. We smile at your ambling and loathe your chicaneries. We sit with our hands folded waiting a call. If our souls were created for nothing, then to no thing will we turn. "If I am the devil's child, I will live unto the devil." We will wait for eons; the waves of unguessed cycles of time shall foam upon unwombed worlds, and spit us forth in vestments new and strange; and still we shall wait the call of the Infinite Counsellor. And if it come, we shall know; and if it do not come we shall know, too.

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