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BOOK REVIEW

SCOTT SLOVIC, *SEEKING AWARENESS IN AMERICAN NATURE WRITING*

READING NATURE WRITING

T. Scott McMillin

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I. Reading

In his work on what we might call a philosophy of reading, Stanley Cavell has repeatedly turned to the writings of Emerson for promptings, for fodder, for titles of books. The essay "Experience," in particular, has been called into Cavellian service, furnishing both the title of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and that work's epigraph: "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition" (Emerson; *CW* III, 29).^[1] First glossing this condition in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (this title also a phrase from Emerson's "Experience,") Cavell commands our attention thus:

Look first at the connection between the hand in unhandsome and the impotently clutching fingers. What is unhandsome is I think not that objects for us, to which we seek attachment, are as it were in themselves evanescent and lubricious; the unhandsome is rather what happens when we conceive thinking, say the application of concepts in judgments, as grasping something, say synthesizing. (86)

After tying this impotent and unhandsome grip on the world to Heidegger and the "relation between thinking and the hand," Cavell goes on to suggest that "Clutching's opposite, which would be the most handsome part of our condition, is I suppose the specifically human form of attractiveness" (86). I read Cavell here to be describing the condition (or at least one of the conditions) of our being in the world and knowing the world in which we are, a condition in which our attempt to know things fails -- not because things are, in themselves, unknowable, but because we have gone about knowing in a manner of thinking that assumes things are (to be) known in their totality, or that we can totally know things by grasping them. Such an attempt, such a condition, always for Cavell (and Cavell's Emerson) leaves us grieving.

To counter that condition, Cavell finds Emerson (and Heidegger) reconfiguring thinking. Instead of knowing things by grasping them, we are to let ourselves be attracted to a different relation to that which we would know.

The reverse of the unhandsome in our condition, of Emerson's clutching, and Heidegger's grasping -- call the reverse the handsome part -- is what Emerson calls being drawn and what Heidegger calls getting in the draw, or the draft, of thinking. Emerson speaks of this in saying that thinking is partial, Heidegger in speaking of thinking as something toward which the human is inclined... Emerson's "partiality" of thinking is, or accounts for, the inflections of partial as "not whole," together with partial as "favoring or biased toward" something or someone. (*Conditions* 41)

Cavell highlights Emerson's complaints about our inability to *not* favor or bias or incline toward things, an inability that keeps us from seeing and hence from reading. If we think reading to be a way of seeing things (nature or the world, a book, a text), then to read seems to ask for an acknowledgment of and resistance to our unwholesome biases, a (self)questioning of one's look, a relaxing of one's grip.

Something similar is in motion in a paragraph from Emerson's "Education," in which the writer remarks the consequences of parking for overlong in any one theoretical terminal:

We have our theory of life, our religion, our philosophy; and the event of each moment, the shower, the steamboat disaster, the passing of a beautiful face, the apoplexy of our neighbor, are all tests to try our theory, the

approximate result we call truth, and reveal its defects. If I have renounced the search of truth, if I have come into the port of some pretending dogmatism, some new church or old church, some Schelling or Cousin, I have died to all use of these new events that are born out of prolific time into multitude of life every hour. (W X, 132)

The writer rues the (hypothetical) situation in which he will have renounced the "search of truth": not the search *for* truth -- the longing for, the grasping after -- but the search of the truthfulness of the relation of the seer to that which would be seen, the search of the truth of the nature of that relation, the truthfulness of the conditions in which such a relation occurs. The seer finds herself or himself in relation to the world, and if that relation is conditioned by the abandonment of the search of truth, then the searcher must be resting in "the port of some pretending dogmatism," must be silently kneeling in "some new church or old church," must be dead to the world.

This has to do with, among other things, the consequences of our being closed to the world, of our succumbing to institutions (new and old churches) of interpretation. A resulting condition of these consequences is the end of interpretation, the death of the interpreter, who no longer can read by virtue of the fact of no longer being in (relation to) the world/text. To counter this, we are to open ourselves to interpretation and to challenge the radical separation of seer and seen that occludes interpretation. As Charles Feidelson, Jr. has observed, the Emersonian notion of "bipolar unity" serves as an attempt to confront this occlusion, this radical separation. [\[2\]](#) In Emerson's *Nature*, the narrator, finding such a division to extend from and perpetuate "mean egotism," struggles to transform the dichotomy by becoming the infamous "transparent eye-ball" (CW I, 10). Not only does such a transformation alter the relation between seer and seen, but it as well reworks the relation of being and seeing. The nouns of the first relation give way to the verbs of the second, so that "I am nothing; I see all..." (10) The series of dissolutions leaves only vision -- the act of seeing -- which itself is the recognition of the circulation of "Universal Being." (Reflections of this verbing can also be found in the notion of "*Man Thinking*" in "The American Scholar.")

Picking up on this, Feidelson understands Emerson to be proposing that "nature is a network of significant relations" (*Symbolism* 132), and sees him as having "move[d] the focus of study from the seer to the act of seeing; and from the act of seeing he worked back to the thing seen, which he reinstated as one aspect of the perceptual event" (128). Feidelson offers a perspective on Emerson as the latter takes a second look at the act of seeing; worrying over the relation of seer and seen, Emerson attends to the act that connects the two, hoping that such attention will transform the dichotomy into an unity (or a relational multiplicity). If poor sight and biased reading have resulted in the (mis)placing of subjects and the (mis)taking of objects, then

their alternative would be expected to undo that opposition. To this extent, Emerson, as he is described by Feidelson (and as he appears as the narrator in *Nature*) can be seen as promoting such an alternative reading practice. His transparent eye-ball means the dissolution of the seer-seen split into the event of seeing; this is nothing less than opening one's eye to the difficulties of seeing itself.

II. Reading Nature

The difficulties involved in seeing and reading become readily visible in *Nature*. One problem is that "few adults can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing" (CW I, 9). The problems, however, do not seem to extend from the apparatus of vision. Rather, a world view befogs our sight at several levels, one being that, as the opening sentence of *Nature* declares, "Our age is retrospective" (CW I, 7). We look backwards, through the eyes of "the foregoing generations," and consequently cannot "enjoy an original relation to the universe." Along with looking the wrong way (in the sense of direction), we look the wrong way by looking scientifically, for "Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight..." (CW I, 39). All this results in the prevailing philosophical approach to the world that parcels out the world into dualism:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses; -- in its common and in its philosophical import. (CW I, 8)

A difficulty confronts the writer of *Nature* at the outset. Working here in philosophy, in words, in writing, the writer is forced into a discourse which, by its very existence, must undo that which it would do over. Philosophical consideration must occur within words; words by their nature, "are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it" (CW I, 28). Discourse can never accomplish the integration of the ME and the NOT ME: "philosophically considered," we are confined to an alienation from that which we would be a part of; "strictly speaking," a writer can only "enumerate values" and "cast up sums." The philosopher, that is, can only participate in the impoverishing of the world, even as she or he attempts to enrich the world by describing an original relation with it. Nature "must be" named and considered under the rank of that name. The problem for the writer is not an incapacity to see

nature, but that he *must* see nature, or that he must see nature as something separate.

As remarked above, the solution to this problem appears to come in the form of dissolution -- the radically separated seer dissolves into a transparent eye-ball, into sight itself. This is what is involved in "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister": the eye-ball, sauntering through the woods, overcoming a gladness that has brought it to the brink of fear, experiences "an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged... Its effect is like that [but not that] of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right" (CW I, 10). Something *like* the sublime, this greatest delight that comes over the seer *nearly* overcomes him, *almost* dissolves him into the landscape through which he walks and on which he looks. The failure indicated by the approximations, a failure with which Emerson's writing struggles, is a problem of recognition. The sentences elided in the above quotation tattle on the writer's inability to move out of the retrospection of the age and the philosophy of ME-NOT ME. Both the me and the not me (pluralized in the ensuing quotation) recognize me, peg me for what I am: "They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that..." (10). Attempting to move through the not me and, in and through that movement, to see its way out of the old separation and into its place as part of the new, exhilarating, fearful landscape, the eye-ball is yet caught in a standstill between new and old, me and not me.

Such difficulties make the prospects for seeing dim at best, but prospects for emerging from our conditional obscurity are nevertheless maintained. The writer of *Nature*, in detailing one aspect of the problematic of reading nature sketched above, remarks that the philosophical split between seer and seen that causes us to look badly (and, as a consequence, not truly see) is exacerbated by "secondary desires" (CW I, 20) to *clutch* the object of seeing.

Go out of the house to see the moon, and 't is mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary journey. The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who could ever clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone; 't is only a mirage as you look from the windows of diligence. (CW I, 14)

Here, one seems to be capable of seeing only if one does not *look*. By making the "necessary journey," by seeing the moon as part of the textual landscape which includes the traveler, the seer dismantles the frame constructed by diligence and a type of desire that would make of the moon an object. (From its Latin root, diligence carries the sense of "gathering apart," setting off,

preferring.) Objects of vision, "if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality" (14). The reality of the seen is thus conditioned by "your necessary journey" and not your eager hunt. Of course, some sort of looking must occur in order for the moon to be recognized, for its beauty and/or existence to be registered by the seer. What appears to mark the difference in this passage is the acknowledgment that seer and seen enjoy a relationality different from the radical separation involved in the hunter and the hunted. They are mediated, yes -- as Feidelson has shown, nature here is a network of significant relations, a textual series of mediations that require interpretation. The interpreter, however, no longer appears as either radically other than nor identical to that which she or he sees/interprets. Seer and seen come to make meaning as the seer recognizes (on "the necessary journey") that both the moon and the seer of the moon are inextricable from textual relations.

That nature might be approached as a text is not a notion peculiar to Emerson, although his writings return to that notion with peculiar frequency, with a certain insistence.

A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause. (CW I, 23)

Here we can see Emersonian insights as well as Emersonian blindnesses. As regards the latter, the dogmatisms that block vision include the gendering of nature as feminine, a primitivist construction of the natural as transcendental signified, an adherence to a teleological worldview. Such blindnesses run through- out Emerson's writing, and are often juxtaposed with claims that run to the contrary (even within the same paragraphs); to say simply that these blindnesses constitute *the* meaning of the Emerson text would be tantamount to confessing that we sit in our own new or old churches. But what does it mean that every form is significant, that nature is an open book, a text? What would it mean to approach a text *in harmony* (from the Greek *harmos*, a joining or fitting) with that text? Is such an approach truly handsome? possible?

III. Reading Nature Writing

In order to respond to such questions as those raised above, I will return briefly to Emerson's nature-as-text scheme and then to a recent attempt to

read nature writing. If the approach to the text of nature is to involve an acknowledgment of a certain harmony of relations, what this might mean is that the *harmos* or fitting in which we are to engage is neither more nor less than a changing set of textual connections. To understand the significance of nature *as* text, one must think the nature *of* text, think of oneself as textual in nature (insofar as one thinks). The separation between seer and seen, nature and naturalist, is to be thought differently, is to be understood as an intersection of two networks of significant relations. Emerson, in *Nature*, writes that "the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to the truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world..." (CW I, 39). That is, the best read naturalist -- perhaps both the one who reads and the one who is read the best -- will learn that no simple subject-object dichotomy obtains regarding the relations of the world/text and the one who would see it. For the would-be seer or naturalist or reader is as much composed of a network of significant relations as the nature that would be seen or read. In order to interpret or arrive at some understanding of the text of nature, one must undertake and undergo (or be underway in) the necessary journey of discovering one's own *textuality* -- hence the reader of the text resembles, rhymes with, is in harmony with the text that is to be read by virtue of being textually composed. Go out to see the text as something radically other than your way of seeing -- as if you could simply see it in all its truth, separated from intersecting networks of significant relations -- and your attempt at interpretation is already vexed.

The effort to see, read, and/or write about nature cannot, then, involve a simplistic clutching of a simple object by a simple subject. Rather (to nod back to Cavell), the thinker/reader/writer need be attracted to or drawn into a position from which can be acknowledged the significant relations that constitute the possibility of the act of seeing. And this would involve, at least in part, the understanding that writers/seers/readers tend toward ports and churches that make that which would be written/seen/read. into an object conforming to the desires or fears formed by the demands of dogmatism. Those tendencies are to be countered by "exploring the *method of nature*. Let us see *that*, as nearly as we can, and try how far it is transferable to the literary life" (CW I, 123). This, in turn, means affirming that everything -- texts and interpreters alike -- are conditioned, are perpetually emanating from and into other significant relations: "Every natural fact is an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation" (CW I, 124). Nothing is static; nothing *is*, in and of itself -- not the I, not the eye, not the eyed.

Purging the eye so as to understand the text of nature thus means cleaning the I out of your eye, or better yet, understanding the eye (and the I) to be as dirty (i.e., non-simple, not pure, complicatedly textual, emanant) as the text that would be seen or understood. To try how far the method of nature is transferable to the literary life is to essay to interpret the nature of the text one would understand through questioning the nature of one's interpretive positions; to read a text is to recognize that one is drawn into a

complex set of textual relations with that which is to be read. The reader then attends to the various shifting relations, the sundry weaves of the significant networks that make up the act of reading.

The failure to do so results, all good intentions notwithstanding, in the grasping, the clutching after, the illusory capture of (the) nature (of the text) -- the text is denied its textual nature and severed from its textual connections. The meanings of nature and nature writing cannot be captured, and especially not if the reader neglects the problematics of reading, of approaching texts. Think of reading as an event in which (at least) two texts approach one another; if even one of the texts is flattened into something "a-textual" (i.e., simple, unitary, disconnected, separate, unconditioned, non-emanating, etc.), the event is transformed into a non-event. Readings (or textual engagements) are simplified into acts of consumption -- the ingestion, the destruction, the putting to use of an object. One example of this would be a reader recognizing his or her complexity but viewing a text (either nature or a book) as something simple, as packing a simple meaning which, when taken into the reader, enables the reader's own simplification. Another would be a reader believing him/herself to be simple or a-textual, whose consequent approach to a recognizably complex text nevertheless sees that text as separate and self-contained -- as simply "what it is" -- uncomplicated by an approach that must, by its nature, always be textually complex.

Incidence of these textual connections and their breakdowns can be found in Scott Slovic's recent study, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*. In this work, some of the problems regarding seeing the text of nature are acknowledged, but the further acknowledgment that those problems pertain to reading the texts of nature writing is lacking. "What especially interests me," writes Slovic, "... is the implication that even when we feel certain we *know* our natural environment, we probably do not -- we may not even have really looked at it" (8). Following Thoreau, Slovic observes that we must pay attention to the way we pay attention to nature. Consequently, the stated "goal in [his] study is to illuminate the purposes and processes of 'paying attention' in American nature writing since Thoreau" (17). What is missing from his endeavor is the effort to "pay attention" to the method of "paying attention" to "paying attention" (and that omission is perhaps attributable in part to Slovic's rather hasty dismissal of the complex writings of Emerson as a simple and sublime "fusion" of viewer and nature), a condition that results in an a-textual, unself-reflexive, diligent search *for* awareness.

By foreclosing on the attention payments, *Seeking Awareness* goes about its search with an unconsidered interest in finding an inherent and immediate presence in nature writing. What is being sought, then, is something that escapes textual complications and the contingent need for textually aware self-consciousness or self-scrutiny. In the case of Thoreau's nature writing,

Slovic holds up the Journal as a text that isn't really a text, that is rather the stuff of nature itself. [*Walden*, in comparison, is decidedly a text, much to its detriment: "The conscious reworking of *the text of Walden*" has the misfortune to have "diminished its replication of nature's rhythm" and to have "drained it" (italicized emphasis added, 41)]. "The Journal" is represented without the italics or underlining that would diacritically mark it as a text. This, in the context of *Seeking Awareness*, is excusable because

The Journal is... not the record of a quest, but the quest itself. Because of its direct roots in lived experience, the Journal cannot follow a static, predetermined path of inquiry and observation; instead, it shadows the author's mental forays into the nature of life. (39)

A juxtaposition of this passage with another on "the Journal" renders manifest Slovic's drive to deny textually significant relations in favor of the simple and direct reception of the uncomplicated and immediate experience that an author has of the "nature of life":

Natural phenomena seem to "register" themselves simultaneously in the book of nature and Thoreau's Journal... The final words [of the passage cited by Slovic] seem to synthesize natural history and Thoreau's meticulous record of occurrences in nature, as if the Journal had become strangely coextensive with the universe. Thoreau's readers develop a similarly heightened alertness, not just to the seasonal progressions he describes, but to the quirks and passions of the writer himself. (48)

The Journal -- which is not a "record," which has "direct roots in lived experience" and is "strangely coextensive with the universe" -- is not *The Journal*, is perhaps not really a journal, not in the textual sense. It is not the text of the writer's vision of or reading of nature, but it is the direct access to nature (for the writer) and to the writer (for the reader) -- as if one were not to read "The Journal" but to inhale it in all its simple glory, just as it itself is the inhalation of nature. While *Seeking Awareness* occasionally backs away somewhat from the notion of the immediate nature of Thoreau's journalizing,[\[3\]](#) it does so without harming the naturalized relation of "The Journal" to the life of its author: "Thoreau's Journal becomes an extension of his life, not only because of its existence as a record of experience, but because its very form emerges from the writer's pulse" (55).

Taking Thoreau's pulse signifies one of the primary drives of *Seeking Awareness*: the establishment of a stable presence separable from life's

doubts, vicissitudes, and complexities. "The duration of one's own life is a very difficult thing to confirm, to know with any certainty, so it helps to obtain external corroboration" (48). Nature and nature writing are ultimately used to substantiate the dream of a full, self-evident, unquestionable self-presence; such a use allows one to avoid the textuality of both that which would be interpreted and that which would interpret, and settle instead for an identification with (and direct experience of) the I of the nature writer (i.e., the one who directly experiences the life of nature). "The writer," rather than posing a set of questions for the construction and interpretation of a text, grounds textual complexity, reins in significant relation; "the text" is not a text, but lived experience; "the reader" knows the meaning of the writing by directly experiencing the experiential truth of the writer: "Even in the absence of the first person singular pronoun there is a distinctive personality dictating the content and language of these entries, a characteristic tone which identifies the origin of these bits of observation as a specific human inspector of nature" (45). The desired result is simplistic soothing of the self of the writer (and consequently the self of the reader), a result that occurs through turning a blind eye on complicating significant relations and focusing instead on a self safely distanced from the other. Slovic avers that "in actuality, Thoreau's hope is that intense contact between the human and the nonhuman, between himself and nature, will have a beneficial effect upon his human self, both emotionally and morally. And in order for nature to have such an effect, it cannot be wholly akin to the human observer: a certain distance or difference is necessary" (38).

My argument, inspired by both Emerson and Cavell, is that this neglectful separation results in bad reading: of books, of the world around us, and of who and what we are in that world. "Bad reading" is a failure to look around, a failure to attend to the relations that constitute texts and the texts that constitute us. In the "Coda" that closes *Seeking Awareness*, the author worries over a problem he has with reading: "Does the text come between me and the world, preventing a more direct and somehow *better* form of contact?" (Slovic's emphasis 177). In response to his question, he observes, "Obviously, if our eyes are glued to a page of text, we can't see the world very well" (178). If my I's eyes are *glued* to anything, I won't see *anything* very well. In order to see and read with more clarity and insight, we need to unfix our eyes and to thoroughly investigate the relations of texts, worlds, natures, readers, and writers. Rather than presenting barriers to awareness, these sets of relations form the conditions of vision. None of these are simply knowable or visible *per se*, but are interpretable in relation to and in reference to one another. Each refers to other sets of significant relations, constituting other texts. Or, as Emerson puts it, "Away profane philosopher! seekest thou in nature the cause? This refers to that, and that to the next, and the next to the third, and everything refers" (CW I, 125). Better understanding of the referentiality and relationality of the various texts implicated in the complex act or event of seeing will perhaps afford the possibility of becoming more textually aware, textually *responsible* -- the nature of /pp. 17-18/ which becoming involves the ability to respond to texts and the responsibility of acknowledging the texts that make up our vision.

Having thus renounced the renouncement of the search of truth, we will be handsomely conditioned to attend to the "new events that are born out of prolific time into the multitude of life every hour." Such, perhaps, may be the prospects for reading nature writing.

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[1] Abbreviations for Emerson's texts are as follows: *CW* refers to *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Harvard University Press (1971-); *W* refers to *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Houghton Mifflin (1883).

[2] See Charles Feidelson Jr., *Symbolism and American Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 124-128.

[3] An example is the qualification that "The Journal in its original form comes close to the author's own immediate experience of the natural world -- it is not a substitute for primary experience, but is better than artificial systematizing" (53-54).