

Are We Not Beautiful?

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Since Kant – whose influence is evident in Emerson’s aesthetic¹ – the beautiful has been variously sentimentalized, fetishized, moralized, and most recently belittled or reviled. It is my intention in this essay to restore some of the significance of the aesthetic and to demonstrate its importance for our moral and existential identities. A close reading of “The Rhodora” through a Kantian lens, as I will try to show, turns such a reading quite fortuitously not only into a defense of a Kantian aesthetic, but also into a commentary on our own ecological and moral obligations toward the world we live in.

The Rhodora

On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.
The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.
Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!

I never thought to ask, I never knew:
But, in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.²

Several passages and images in “The Rhodora” clearly echo Kant’s aesthetic. The first line invokes the speaker’s solitude, a Kantian precondition for the experience of the beautiful, for the beautiful must be encountered without oppressive social constraints or obligations. The plural of “our solitudes” implies moreover that the speaker of the poem is the Emersonian representative person, the subject who speaks for the universal, though contingent upon the particular “we,” as Kant would insist likewise. The second line tells us that the speaker “found the fresh Rhodora,” and this finding of the flowering bush implies that the beautiful must be a happening, an accident, it must not be expected or planned. In *Nature*, Emerson insists that beauty “comes unsought, and comes because it is unsought” (*CW* 1, 16). “Go out of the house to see the moon,” he writes in the same book, “an ’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” (*CW* 1, 14). It can only be found accidentally – in “a damp nook,” for example – rather than perhaps on a museum wall. Though the beautiful may happen in a museum, the price of admission does not assure that it will.

The beautiful is a happening. It is an event. Indeed, the beautiful for Kant and for Emerson is neither a thing nor an object.³ To make the beautiful into a thing would be to objectify, to limit, to fetishize it, such as we do when we go to a museum and take pictures of some paintings, and then, thinking we own them in our camera, turn away from the painting instantly. “How strangely have I felt of pictures,” writes Emerson in “Experience,” “that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again” (*CW* 3, 33). For, the beautiful is not to be had; it is an eminently temporal experience; it is “fluxional”; it is “vehicular and transitive,” to use some of Emerson’s terms from the essay “The Poet” (*CW* 3, 20).

Thus the rhodora is not the beautiful in itself, nor can we own it, buy it, or ever clutch it. Nor would Emerson pick it, or take a picture of it. When in his poem "Each and All," the poet finds beautiful sea shells and takes them home with him, he discovers that "the poor, unsightly, noisome things/ Had left their beauty on the shore..." (*CW* 9, 15). Meanwhile, as the rhodora is "Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook," it is this spreading that is beautiful; and it is accidentally to come upon this spreading of the rhodora's blooms in a damp nook, and to see it and to love it, that constitutes the experience of the beautiful. "The dead matter of nature is transformed from the level of commodity to the level where it is experienced as beauty," as Barry Tharaud explains, "and this process is an act of spiritual elevation for the observer."⁴ But how fragile, how fleeting such spiritual elevation in the experience of the beautiful must be. "The purple petals" have already "fallen in the pool" and will soon disappear in the "black water"; the red-bird's visitation will be exquisitely brief. "This charm is wasted on the earth and sky...." Indeed, this charm must be wasted because it is quite literally wasting away in the fluxional, in the process, in the experience that is the beautiful – you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again. Since the term "charm" is attributed to the sages, it is somewhat ambiguous. For Kant, charm implies a sensuous desire that would make the beautiful merely agreeable. Emerson, I think, might use the term either to indict the sages for breaking with Kant or he might advocate, as Sandra Morris has argued, a more sensuous, more passionate aesthetic.⁵

Emerson's insistence, finally, that "Beauty is its own excuse for being" paraphrases, of course, Kant's famous assertion that the beautiful is a purposive purposelessness.⁶ The question "Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!" is thus cognitively unanswerable. "A beauty not explicable," Emerson writes in "The Poet," "is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end" (*CW* 3, 10). The poet therefore "never thought to ask, ... never knew:" – while contrary to the poet, the sages do impertinently ask the rhodora why she wastes her charms upon the earth

and sky.⁷ (More on the sages later.) But perhaps only a rival of the rose might be beautiful since roses are expensive, cultivated, and usually sought or bought in preordained numbers and certain lengths and on certain obligatory occasions. Thus Morris has called attention to the radically democratizing, romantic implications of the rhodora as a counterpoint to neoclassical concepts of beauty.⁸

The non-conceptual, unanswerable, inexplicable quality of the beautiful finally extends, in the poem's last lines, to Emerson's assertion that human existence likewise has no other cause or legitimacy than the beautiful. "The self-same Power that brought me there brought you." It is neither God nor matter that brought us here – but "Power." Emerson's term "power" critiques not only religious reifications or personifications of the divine, but also Newtonian materialism. We as well as the beautiful come about through transitive, fluxional, vehicular processes; "the divine animal," he writes in "The Poet," "carries us through this world" (*CW* 3, 16). Like the beautiful, our being – neither an essentialist essence, nor a Platonic essence, Emerson calls it an immortal essence – is not unchanging matter but a flowing and unfolding of matter, as we witness it in the "spreading" of the rhodora's blooms, and as we experience it in our "active participation" in "the oneness of creation."⁹

The experience of this oneness is not a romantic ideal without significant ecological consequences. Rather, the consequences announce themselves through the existential analogy between the beautiful and human existence. For, just as the beautiful exists merely to please deserts, sluggish brooks, and red-birds – so do we. The answer, thus, to the poem's subtitle, "On Being Asked, Whence Is the Flower?" is the same as to the question, Whence are we? How beautiful indeed if we were here to *please* deserts, brooks, and birds, for we of course mostly do not please them. Mostly, *we* are not beautiful. If we were beautiful, we would have to conclude that "the self-same Power" that brought us here brings the blooms of flowers. We would have to conclude that we, like flowers, are here for no other reason than to be beautiful – to be beautiful, that is, to flowers and to each other.

But the poet who should serve as representative person for such ecological benevolence is perhaps a rarity, certainly an exception. As Emerson admits near the end of "The Poet," "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe" (*CW* 3, 21), though he ends the essay by furtively advising just such a poet: "Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from the muse." And a little further on: "thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season" (*CW* 3, 23, 24). Emerson's denigration of times, customs, graces, politics, and the opinions of others implies that if one were to assign value to human existence, as one certainly must, such an assignment would have to be precisely in aesthetic rather than cognitive or material or functional terms. Thou shalt take all from the muse, for neither knowledge, nor matter, nor utility, nor graces, nor politics, nor the opinions of men can assure us of the value of human existence. Only the beautiful can. And yet, we do not know how the beautiful comes about: we cannot clutch it; we cannot keep it. Nor can we know *why* a power has brought us here – all of which echoes Kant's insistence that desire and conceptual understanding, the very tools of practical living, are suspended.

Accordingly, without the beautiful, Emerson declares, we lead merely conformist, ideologically appropriated lives. But we should lead "necessary" lives, he writes in "The Poet." For just as "The beautiful rests on the foundations of the necessary" (*CW* 3, 9), so the inverse is also true: the necessary rests on the foundations of the beautiful. In his essay on "Fate" the two terms amount almost to oxymoronic synonyms: "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity" (*CW* 7, 26). What is necessary must be beautiful, lest it be monstrous. What is beautiful must be necessary, lest it be superfluous.

Typically in Emerson's texts, ethical value, human value, and poetic utterance are closely aligned. Although it may sound rhapsodic or foolish to contemporary ears when Emerson in "The Poet" proclaims that "we take the cheerful hint of the immortality of our essence" (*CW* 3, 18) from the felicity of poetic utterance, it is also foolish to expect that either a

cognitive or a utilitarian argument could convince us that there is such a thing as “the immortality of our essence.” If for Emerson a justification for the necessity of human life must perforce take the form of rhapsodic, spiritual incantation, a poetic speaking (as we hear it throughout in Emerson’s style), it must be because analogously, and I quote *Nature* again, “no reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty” (*CW* 1, 17). Beauty can’t be sought or bought or even thought. As Emerson declares in his essay “Art”: “Beauty will not come at the call of a legislature It will come, as always, unannounced, and spring up between the feet of brave and earnest men” (*CW* 2, 218), as it does in “The Rhodora” or as it does in “Each and All,” where “As I spoke, beneath my feet / The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath” (*CW* 9, 15). Thus the “suddenly meaningful, suddenly eloquent representative of the *Rhododendron canadense*,” as Albert J. von Frank points out.¹⁰

If the brave and earnest are good – how could they otherwise be brave or earnest? – they remind us, as Emerson writes in “The Poet,” that “nature is as truly beautiful as it is good” (*CW* 3, 6). Beauty, as Kant claims in his aesthetic theory, is a symbol of the morally good.¹¹ For, like beauty, the good must come unannounced, it must spring up between the feet of the brave and the earnest. How easy to trample the ground-pine, how easy to overlook the *Rhododendron canadense*. Like beauty, the good must be unsought, un-legislated, otherwise it is merely a bargain, the means for a purpose. “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue,” as the “Beauty” chapter of *Nature* declares (*CW* 1, 15). Beauty is not sought by or through reason; beauty cannot be sought, it comes unannounced, it springs up, hence Emerson’s high regard for surprise as a form of knowledge deeper than deliberation and heed.

If the necessity of human life can only be argued in aesthetic terms, it is always implicit that the good is also a constituent in the definition of human necessity. “The immortality of our essence” cannot be ascribed merely to our souls, nor of course to our worldly success; that is to say, Emerson is not madly claiming that we *are* immortal or that we acquire immortality through delivering papers at conferences or writing essays

for journals. Rather, our immortal essences are the beautiful and the good, even if times, customs, graces, politics, and opinions insist that immortal essence is the metaphysical rant of a fool and a churl for a long season.

The analogy between the beautiful and human life – both in their essence being accidental, transitive processes rather than fixed material objects (*CW* 3, 20) – thus suggests that poetic or artistic expression – and this is Emerson's argument in "The Poet" as it is in "Poetry and the Imagination" – affirms human necessity. When he asks: "Do you think Burns has had no influence on the life of men and women in Scotland, – has opened no eyes and ears to the face of Nature and the dignity of man and the charm and excellence of women?" (*CW* 8, 38), his question is evidently rhetorical. Human necessity is not grounded in its existential, material accident but in the accident of the beautiful and the good. Or to say the same differently: We are not necessary; but when we are beautiful, we are. Thus, as Emerson declares in "Poetry and the Imagination": "life should not be mean; ... life should be an image in every part beautiful" (*CW* 8, 39).

The reason why the beautiful holds such a central place in Emerson's texts is because it is his ground for any claim to ethical authenticity and political authority. "Beauty is the creator of the universe" (*CW* 3, 5), and again: "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue" (*CW* 1, 15). The historic examples Emerson cites to exemplify this fundamental conjunction of beauty and goodness all have in common what Kant would call the harmony of the mental faculties, or the harmony of subject and object, or that of mind and matter in the aesthetic experience.

If I now proceed to ask – to ask finally – *how* exactly the beautiful might spring up between our feet, it is because I mentioned that Emerson's image implies the possibility of our simply not seeing it. It implies that we might trample on beauty, as one might if one looks but does not really see. Emerson's sole condition for the experience of the beautiful is that "if eyes were made for seeing,/ Then Beauty is its own

excuse for being.” I emphasize this conditional clause by adding, “if eyes were made for seeing,” *only* “Then Beauty is its own excuse for being.” Only if we use our eyes for *seeing* then the rhodora’s *being* will rhyme with it and reveal itself in its eternal essence. The rhodora should tell *this* to “the sages,” Emerson advises, “if they ask thee why/ This charm is wasted on the earth and sky.”

I have already noted that the sages were accidentally correct when they thought of the rhodora’s blooming as eminently temporal, a wasting – “life is a flitting state, a tent for a night,” as Emerson writes in “Experience” (*CW* 3, 38) – but their question has already blinded them to the experience of the beautiful. Because they ask and because they think they know, they think of this wasting in purely economic terms, on the level of commodity, and thus imply that beauty, like a good lunch, is a commercial entity; that the rhodora’s charm is wasted because it is not blooming for them.¹²

Although for Emerson the particular always exemplifies “a universal grace” (*CW* 1, 17), in the essay “Art,” Emerson claims that “the virtue of art lies in detachment, in sequestering one object from the embarrassing variety” (*CW* 2, 211), it is to discover in the solitary, sequestered particular its necessity. It is to find the single rhodora spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook. This is no small order. For are we not tempted to see in the smallness of a particular object its superfluity? Are we not tempted to forget it because there will be others, because the singular is expendable, because it is only an iteration of a collective plurality? But it is precisely to salvage the object from such oblivion that the poet, the artist, invokes the object in its small, particular, incomparable singularity – in order to intimate, precisely on behalf of the smallness of the particular, “a universal grace.”

In “The Poet,” Emerson writes beautifully that “The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendence of their nature, – him they will suffer” (*CW* 3, 15). Thus, the poet of “The Rhodora” addresses the rhodora as “dear” (“Tell them, dear...”). I take Emerson’s distinction

between the spy and the lover to mean that the poet serves to articulate the transcendency of things by loving them, by invoking a thing's necessity, its beauty; it is the very transcendency of the nature of things to suffer the lover. The lover is indistinguishable from the poet, whose perception of the thing happens before the intervention of the synthesizing mental powers. Hence the breathless conjunction between lover and poet in Emerson's phrase above, and the immediate claim in the same sentence, in a kind of Gertrude Steinean logic, that the lover is the poet is the transcendency of their nature, for these categories are inseparable. If the path of things is silent, the poet is to speak of them, to speak them into being. How easy it would be not to hear them as they come silently, unannounced. The spy will not see them because he is looking for them; all the spy wants is information.

It is from oblivion, from getting lost, – the young men "lose themselves in the crowd," Emerson writes in "Experience" (*CW* 3, 31); "on the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying," he laments in "The Poet" (*CW* 3, 19) – it is from disappearing in the crowd, in the snowstorm, it is from getting lost in the flux of things, of language, of time, of symbols that the poet recalls us to ourselves, to the fact that we, too, are symbols of the beautiful, of the good. For have we not sprung up between feet? – the feet of poetic meters not least – we too came unannounced, are we not surprises? Does not the divine animal carry us through this world – the divine animal that moves in the spreading blooms of the rhodora? Are we not beautiful?

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Notes

¹ See Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2003), 201.

² All subsequent quotations of Emerson are from *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (CW)*, 10 Vols., 1971-2013 (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP), Vol. 9, *Poems*, ed. Albert J. von Frank and Thomas Wortham (2011), 79.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1974), § 6. Thus Albert J. von Frank writes in his headnote to “The Rhodora” that “For Emerson, the meaning of the flora and fauna would not lie in their distinctive physical characteristics, as Linnaeus insisted, but in those important relations of mutuality which, in the nature of things, they sustained to man the observer” (*CW* 9, 78).

⁴ Barry Tharaud, “Introduction: Emerson Bicentenary Essays,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, Vol. 30, Nos. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2003): 33. Also published as *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Bicentenary Appraisals* (Mosaic: Volume 27), ed. Barry Tharaud, with a Foreword by Lawrence Buell (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006): 27.

⁵ Sandra Morris, “‘Metre-Making’ Arguments: Emerson’s Poems” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 225.

⁶ Kant, “Schönheit ist die Form der Zweckmässigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks an ihm wahrgenommen wird” (§ 17).

⁷ See R.A. Yoder, *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), 83.

⁸ Sandra Morris, “Poetry and Poetics” in *Emerson in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013) (forthcoming).

⁹ Tharaud, 33.

¹⁰ Von Frank, 79.

¹¹ Kant, § 59.

¹² See Yoder, 83; see Richard Tuerk, “Emerson and the Wasting of Beauty: ‘The Rhodora,’” *American Transcendental Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1990): 7.

