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Our Secret Melancholy

EMERSON began his essay “Experience” with the question, “Where do we find ourselves?” It is a question for the moment, not meant only for America in 1842 when he took pen to paper to answer. It seems painfully clear that at present America has entered a period of great change and uncertainty. Both of these perceptions cause deep anxiety.

Many of us, from time to time, have talked complacently about living uneasily in a deeply troubled world, in effect, living our ordinary lives in a state Emerson called a secret melancholy. In an orderly world, such thoughts are manageable, even philosophic in the stylish sense. Today, however, what was once a secret melancholy we find to be raw, open, and exposed. We can no longer afford to nurture, like the French, this little kernel of discontent like some kind of fashionable *ennui*.

Can Emerson, a nineteenth-century writer and lecturer known for his idealism and trenchant aphorisms, have something truly useful to say to us today? Are his words relevant to our personal and collective lives?

Emerson reminded us in “Fate” that we are incompetent to solve the times. It was a valid warning not to expect too much from program-

matic solutions. Is it true that great engines like the “economy” run independently, irrespective of human intervention? In our most recent case, it is apparent that when human actions cause a crisis, human intervention must intervene to solve it. But Emerson also observed that “the times” usually move in natural cycles and in huge motions beyond human technology or correction. In such cases, we have to look inward to find a place to stand and a handle to grasp just to hold on during these careening rides.

There is an important difference between what Emerson called “the times” and what we call “the culture.” In 1955, the critic Lionel Trilling, in the preface to a collection of literary essays entitled *The Opposing Self*, defined culture this way:

I speak of the relation of the self to *culture* rather than to *society* because there is a useful ambiguity which attends the meaning of the word culture. It is the word by which we refer not only to a people’s achieved work of intellect and imagination but also to its mere assumptions and unformulated valuations, to its habits, its manners, and its superstitions. The modern self is characterized by certain *powers of indignant perception* [italics mine] which, turned upon this unconscious portion of culture, have made it accessible to conscious thought.

Emerson was among this class of persons with powers of indignant perception. The word “indignant” here is key to understanding Emerson, in that he cannot be characterized as one who was *alienated* by his culture, or even *rebellious*. But he was *indignant* if by that word we understand what it is to be, in a genuine and not self-righteous way, morally offended. It is rejection in the face of perceived injustice and, for Emerson in particular, a culture of solely materialistic valuations. Further, Emerson’s indignation allowed a series of perceptions which, as Trilling suggests, rendered unconscious portions of culture accessible to conscious thought.

Part of what Emerson meant by “self-culture” involves this elevation into conscious thought of what mostly remains hidden in the uncon-

scious through inattention, habit, and conformity. We find it easier, even comforting, to allow the world to have its way with us, a tendency which includes the assumption that “the way things are” is normative. Self-culture begins in earnest when we consciously choose to question “the way things are” in favor of what is better, stronger, and more life-enhancing.

If we in our present culture are incompetent to solve the times, the question of what we *are* competent to do cries out for an answer. But the answer to cultural change should not need to be some skeptical derision of efforts at reform or, even worse, a cynical reaction to efforts to effect change. Emerson stakes his claim on a higher form of action, on solutions leading to a higher platform than most of us are accustomed to occupy.

Faced with the temptations of reform and activism (what Emerson called “association”) he personally demurred, based on his own talents, but then he offered his solution. Here is a passage to hear from “New England Reformers.”

Men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power, when once they are united; as in a celebrated experiment, by expiration and respiration exactly together, four persons lift a heavy man from the ground by the little finger only, and without sense of weight. But this union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated. It is the union of friends who live in different streets or towns. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union, the smaller and the more pitiful he is. But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member, and, to the astonishment of all, the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke. Government will be adamantine without any governor. The union must be ideal in actual individualism.

Here is the theme of the integrity of the mind, the unity of thought, feeling, and action within the individual applied in the world by that individual, who with others of similar unity then have the effect of concert. The objection to this line of reasoning is that the desired effect seems more likely to come magically rather than mechanically. Emerson, in fact, admits that, even dares to celebrate it. At the beginning of the above passage he says, "It is and will be magic." It is and will be a *metaphysical* movement and not a material one. And yet, the results will be tangible.

What Emerson means by unity and concert is that our actions, like our thoughts and our principles, can be applied broadly in the same spirit that brought about the self-recovery of our more personal spiritual seeking. It is in this way that "our own best thoughts" carry a societal significance beyond ordinary thinking. Our best thoughts, Emerson said, are actions in the world because consciousness is the ground of being and these thoughts make the world what it is.

This interpretation of spiritual action begs the question: Isn't this way of reacting to the state of crisis in America the same thing as saying, "Well, let's pray about it. Maybe God will put things right." The difference, of course, is that spiritual action of the Emersonian kind is not the same thing as praying for God as a transcendental agent to intervene on behalf of His people. As Emerson said in "Worship," "Men talk of mere morality, —which is much as if one should say, Poor God, with nobody to help him." Emersonian action asks us to find an effective course of action by bringing into harmony the faculties of mind, feeling, and firm moral principle. It then asks us to employ our talents, those nature-oriented resources within, to find the best expression for the need facing us. Only then will things change for the better.

The integrity of our own minds, he said, is the sacred place where action in the world has both its formulation and its final expression. This is the sacred space, the ground, of our own best thoughts. In a time like the present, when, as Yeats expressed it, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," we

must not look beyond our own resources to so-called divine intervention (The Second Coming?) or solely to some heroic human figure to step out of the shadows with a magical voice and brilliant solutions. The real work is with those who have the capacity to find concert among strangers working in unity toward a genuine transformation. It is, as Emerson expressed it, like lifting the heavy body of culture with little fingers working in concert.

We cannot pass from this topic without addressing the last sentence in the above passage. Emerson concludes his ecstatic plea for unity with “The union must be ideal in *actual* individualism.” The word ideal here stands for consciousness at the ground of being, where Emerson’s Over-Soul resides as the source of our own personal conscious life. Unless we grasp this principle and grant it credibility, we cannot claim genuine unity with the ground. All our so-called “thinking” without that ground is mere ego and self-interest. When Emerson uses the word “actual” to modify “individualism,” he refers to that universal ground as the source of *actual* individuality. It is, as he has said in “Worship,” “. . . that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is, a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom.”

The obedience to which he refers here is to that ground of being, and such obedience is qualitatively different from what orthodox religion means when it uses the phrase “the will of God.” Connecting to a consciousness or intelligence greater than our personal thought mechanisms is the “voluntary obedience” in Emerson’s idealism, and when the Harvard divines in 1840 were faced with this vision and sought to “save” Unitarianism from the Transcendental incursion, it was against this connection that they railed. By definition, most religious doctrines in their practice thrust apart the human from the divine, no matter how tenuously each dogma defines the separation. Transcendental idealism is the only spiritual philosophy evolved in the West that asserts an intimate and pervasive presence of a higher nature as part and parcel with the human. What the nature and substance of that presence may be, and how it exists and has meaning for us, remains the great

mystery at the heart of the enterprise known as Spiritual Idealism.

Even without knowing the precise nature of this omnipresent and permeating consciousness, we know its opposite, what Emerson calls “inner death.” When he speaks of “we” in this next passage, he is referring to American culture, which he then describes.

We do not believe that any education, any system of philosophy, any influence of genius, will ever give depth of insight to a superficial mind. Having settled ourselves into this infidelity, our skill is expended to procure alleviations, diversion, opiates. We adorn the victim with manual skill, his tongue with languages, his body with inoffensive and comely manners. So have we cunningly hid the tragedy of limitation and inner death we cannot avert. Is it strange that society should be devoured by a secret melancholy, which breaks through all its smiles, and all its gayety [*sic*] and games?

The relevance of this description of our “tragedy of limitation” is frightening because it suggests a submission to a general condition we believe to be intractable. When Emerson began “Fate” with the observation, “Our America has a bad name for superficialness,” he was doing more than merely stating what we already know. “Fate” is a strong example of Emerson’s “powers of indignant perception,” but it is also a plea for radical intervention. What was true in 1844 is certainly more so now. The difference is in the degree of this inner death, our secret melancholy, and the nature of the opiates we employ to remain in a condition of ignorance.

Rather than address this condition individually or collectively, we as a culture demur and give in to soothing alleviations, diversions, and opiates. The proliferation of electronic chatter alone is enough to stifle any instinct to rise above it to discover something more substantial. We know better, of course.

Emerson certainly maintained a positive conviction in the face of what seems to us as an intractable malaise. Consider, for example, this outburst further along in the essay:

Life must be lived on a higher plane. We must go up to a higher platform, to which we are always invited to ascend; there, the whole aspect of things changes. I resist the skepticism of our education, and of our educated men. I do not believe that the differences of opinion and character in men are organic. I do not recognize, beside the class of the good and the wise, a permanent class of skeptics, or a class of conservatives, or of malignants, or of materialists. I do not believe in two classes.

Since Emerson himself lived and wrote on this higher platform, why not join him? It will take muscular restraint to turn away from diversions and opiates, but the rewards are great enough and might actually save our lives. We might find that “The soul lets no man go without some visitations and holy days of a diviner presence.” Is work involved? It was the kind but firm Spinoza who told us that anything truly excellent is hard and not easily achieved. There is a climb to a more rigorous language and the exactions of thought, but if we are reasonably confident of the rewards and of a more sublime view from the summit, then why not begin the climb? In “The Oversoul,” Emerson declared, “God will not make himself manifest to cowards.” The same could be said for making manifest the Dream of America.

The challenge of joining Emerson on this higher platform presents certain problems of beginning. My choice is to go back in time to the foundations of what we now call the Perennial Philosophy, that esoteric tradition sometimes linked with mysticism. It was for Emerson the basis of his idealism, as evidenced by his devotion to the Presocratics, Plato, Plotinus, and subsequently to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Greek scholar and translator Thomas Taylor.