



## "THE ONE MAN IMAGE IN EMERSON'S "THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR"

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### ABSTRACT

The present article on R.W. Emerson's "The American Scholar" concentrates on its relation to Emerson's life and a ideas, but a notable exception is Richard P. Adams' article, which provides an excellent investigation of Emerson's use of the Organic metaphor, specifically the formula derived from the living plant. Adams' article provides a stepping-stone to closer examination of Emerson's literary technique in 'The American Scholar' a careful reading of which indicates that, although vestiges of more formal features of discursive writing images which collectively serve as a structuring motif. This imagery, particularly as it finally relates to the notion of the One Man, represents Emerson's experiment with a mode of internal organization.

**KEYWORDS:** The American Scholar , prominent imagery , tripartite sequence.

### INTRODUCTION

Emerson perfected his use of a hieroglyph as an aesthetic device, as the ordering visual center of an essay, during 1837 and 1838. Nevertheless motifs of "The American Scholar" which provide something of a coda for the prominent imagery in later essays, are meant to contribute collectively to a visual impression of the scholar as a person who realizes 'the philosophy of the erect position' by abandoning his previous divided condition, rising to his feet, and approaching spiritual wholeness.

The first formal division of "The American Scholar" considers the influence of nature on the scholar. Here Emerson introduces a tripartite sequence of images, in ascending order, based on root, stem, and flower. He instructs us to discover roots running under ground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from on one stem' and to realize that nature and man 'proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower'. For Emerson, the most beautiful part of the plant appropriately appears in the upper regions, which in essay after essay symbolize the spiritual realm. In part this beauty includes the fact that from flowers come fruits. Throughout "The American Scholar" Fruit operates as a metaphor for what mankind someday may achieve, and it is disgraceful 'not to yield that peculiar fruits which each man was created to bear'. The ideal scholar, whose every deed detaches 'itself from the life like a ripe fruit', will become 'the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest', others will see in him 'their own green and crude being-ripened.'

Whereas the image cluster of root, stem, flower, and fruit is well developed, the complementary sequence of earth, air, and sky is barely suggested. This excerpt presents the series: 'every day' the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows' The preceding sequence shows how Emerson tries to suggest motion within the categories, thereby preventing them from being mere static coordinates. The sky, like the flower, crowns this sequence; significantly the stars, a synecdoche for the sky, appear later when Emerson explains that the scholar sits "in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure

and nebulous stars of the human mind".(1) This astronomy of thought is a correlative for the fruit the scholar bears, an idea equally evident in the image of an aster in Emerson's poem, 'The Apology'.

Both image clusters, root-stem-flower and earth-air-sky finally relate to man, specifically to a third image sequence pertaining to the human body. 'We no more feel or know (our present act), than we feel the feet, or the hand, or the brain of our body'. Man's feet, hands, and head represent parallel correlatives to nature's root (earth) Stem (air) and flower (sky). That Emerson equates the human head to the sky is evident in his reference to the scholar's effort to chart an astronomy of the mind; that he associates it with the flower is clear in an instance of humor, subtly drawn or derived from his motif, when he remarks about the impropriety of the person who hides 'his head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes'. Significantly this comment is a conflation of two journal entries, which only in their final version emphasize Emerson's point about the human head; for in his scheme heads, like flowers and stars, are by their nature designed for ascent. Ironically, in spite of nature's floral reminder of his proper position, the person perversely hiding his head absurdly thrusts upward an inappropriate portion of his anatomy.

Throughout his essay Emerson transforms the basic order of the feet-hands head sequence into a more complex amalgamation of images. He expands references to extremities of the body to include the actions of walking, working, and thinking. Concerning his feet, the scholar avoids 'treading the old road' because he seeks to awaken men from their 'sleep-walking'. He especially walks or travels within his own mind: "Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns that in going down in to the secrets of his own mind, he has descended in to the secrets of all minds".(2) That Emerson relates feet and instinct in this passage is an important point.

Emerson makes even greater use of hand imagery. The word HAND occurring many times in this and other writings, is most often associated with labour. Since our recent actions comprise 'the business which we now have in hand,' it is imperative to realize the truth of the proverb that 'all things have two handles. Beware of the wrong one'. The scholar, therefore, must not merely follow the instincts of his feet; he must also will or act with his hands. Contrary to popular belief, Emerson explains in imagery relating to manual toil, the scholar is not 'as unfit for any handiwork or public labour, as a pen knife for an axe'; rather his deeds actually give expression to the divine nature within mankind, for 'as the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it'. The principal benefit from the work of the scholar's hands, his divine handiwork, is the steady movement of mankind toward unity and brotherhood. Thus, speaking in the persona of the scholar, Emerson says: " I grasp the hands of those next (to) me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work." (3)

The correspondence between nature imagery and that of the human body is even more pronounced in references to the employment of hands in the activity of farming. Frequently he stresses the manual tools used in farming: 'There is virtue yet in the Hoe and the Spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands'. Farming serves as a metaphor yoking man and nature in a relationship implying action, in contrast to the stasis his categories might otherwise suggest, and implying a union in which the two component parts can not be meaningfully distinguished. The final emphasis of "The American Scholar" falls upon the purpose of farming, namely the ripening of fruits and the gathering of harvest. Later, in "prudence", Emerson treats the farm as a central hieroglyph.

As one might predict from the other sequences, the head is the crowning feature of the three extremities of the body, and so the scholar aptly sits at 'the head of the table'. Just as the flower depends on the stem and leaves, the scholar's head requires the body's hands and actions. Without action, without the photosynthesizing leaves of the body, 'thought can never ripen into truth'; for 'he who has put forth his total strength in fit actions, has the richest return of wisdom.' Nevertheless, the stem is hierarchically lower than the flower and action remains subordinate to thought.

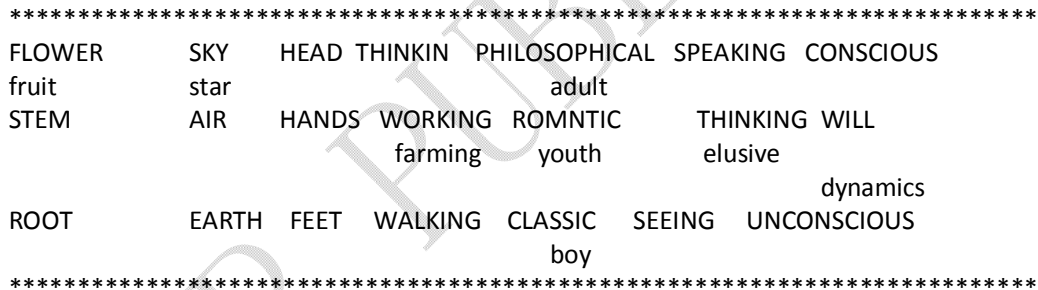
Emerson fashions still another parallel image cluster to characterize thought. In the opening paragraph of the essay he refers to the 'ancient Greeks' and the 'Troubadours,' and 'our contemporaries', allusions which become clearer later in the work : "Historically there is thought to be a difference in the ideas which predominate over successive epochs, and there are data for marking the genius of the classis of

the Romantic, and now of the Reflective through all three. The boy is a Greek, the Youth, Romantic and the adult, Reflective. "An upward progression, corresponding to that of the other sequences, is quite apparent in his differentiation of these historical and ontogenic phases.

Emerson approaches intellection in terms of still another tripartite series: seeing, thinking, and speaking. This sequence, the sixth in the essay discloses more explicitly what Emerson means by the thinking stage of the walking-working-thinking image cluster. The three components of the former series have been rightly the subject of much critical attention, so few basic facets of its presence as a motif need to be noted. In contrast to the average man's 'sluggard intellect' peering 'from under its iron lids,' the Scholar 'speculates.' As the Latin meaning of Specula (watch over) intimates, the scholar possesses distant vision, sees widely from the lofty elevation of his foresight. The importance of vision, distant as opposed to near, is crucial to Emerson's belief and particularly relevant to his aesthetic based on the visual whole of the 'distant' hieroglyph, not on the particulars of 'near' sentences. What the scholar sees, however, must be transformed through the mysterious process which is not labeled in the essay but which is the will, the inexplicable principal of animation resulting in thought. This process comprises mental work or action and is intimated evasively: 'The preamble of thought the transition is action'. In this sequence of upward progression, the unconscious is equivalent to seeing, to instinct, the feet, (we see with our feet) the act of transition is the very dynamics or animation of the thought process, which begins with seeing and is related to the will, to the hands; consciousness, the flower of thought and the fruit of truth, corresponds to speaking, to the head. As man thinking, that is to say as one who genuinely participates in all three phases of intellection (perceiving, speaking, and the elusive dynamic uniting them into a process), the scholar 'Sees absolute truth, and utters truth, or creates'.

Emerson express this sequence in still another manner 'Experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin.' Leaf like action or experience is internally and mysteriously transformed into conscious thought.

The following diagram may make these relationships clearer.



The above shows not only the parallel aspects of Emerson's sequences but also how they steadily move toward defining the internal nature of the human mind. He uses these related series to eradicate any sense of separation between the exterior deeper (the Scholar) dives into his privatest secretest presentment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, and most public. In the later work he asserts that nothing exists in the world which is not duplicated in man's body, 'a sort of miniature or summary of the world. 'He adds: "There is nothing in his body which is not repeated as in a celestial sphere in his mind... There is nothing in his brain which is not repeated in a higher sphere in his moral system." (4)

The notion that what is private really is public, that what is external in nature and history actually is internal in the self accounts for images of circularity in "The American Scholar" There is never a beginning, there is never an end to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself; the stream retreats to its source." (5) Such imagery reinforces the emphasis of other motifs on the correspondence between nature and human mind.

At first, the very hierarchical scheme informing the imagistic framework of "The American Scholar" seems antithetical to this stress on circularity. But verticality, a progressive verticality or spiral, is a key Emersonian image for the process of inward expansion. Vertical categories in "The American Scholar" merely represent and early expression of this spiral which Emerson dramatized more successfully later.

In "The American Scholar", the cumulative effect of Emerson's artistry operation at a nearly subliminal level, communicates a visual impression of how mankind's approach to unity, as exemplified in the Scholar is based on nature's inner principle of ascent.

#### REFERENCES

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4. Emerson, "The American Scholar", p.52.
5. Emerson, "The American Scholar", p.54.
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