The Aeolian Harp: Beauty and Unity in the Poetry and Prose of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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As a poet-scholar, Ralph Waldo Emerson sought to describe the unity and beauty of the "Over-Soul" to his readers through various poetic descriptions. Emerson's essay, "The Over-Soul," defines this spirit as a unity "within which each man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (*CW* 2:160). This "great soul" charms Emerson into action "with energies which are immortal" (2:175).

Emerson's initial important works describe the relationship between man and the Over-Soul. He explains in his essay "The Over-Soul" that when man accepts "the tide of being which floats us into the secret of nature" (*CW* 2:168) and finds his center, the "Deity will shine through him" (2: 169-70). This celestial light is the Over-Soul. As a result, "he will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity" (2:175).

Using the physical form of the harp played by an Orphic poet, Emerson symbolizes a melodious and lyrical connection between the harp, the Orphic poet, and the spiritual Over-Soul. Not surprisingly, the Orphic poet derives its name from Orpheus, an ancient Greek hero who sang and played the harp so skillfully that it could charm the divinities of the underworld (Ovid, X:766-67).[1] Even though Emerson believed that all men and women could be poets, he tended to associate the poet with a figure of consequence such as Merlin, from the bardic tradition and the legend of Camelot.

Emerson sustained his vision of the Over-Soul's unifying effect over the course of his life. But in later poetry he demonstrated that when an Orphic poet such as the aging and sinful Merlin fails to convey the pure vision of the Over-Soul through poetic song, another will stand his place to convey nature's message. Emerson's later poetry suggests that a harmonious relationship with nature and the Over-Soul may be achieved by all people who are willing to hear the Over-Soul's message in nature through pure and reliable sources such as the Aeolian

harp. As Emerson ages, he begins to view the harp as more than an instrument; it becomes a symbol of beauty, wisdom, and divine harmony in his poetry.

The taint of human impurity does not touch the Aeolian harp because the music of the harp is produced by nature's breeze. Emerson once told Moncure Conway that "A single breath of spring fragrance coming into his open window and blending with strains of his Aeolian harp had revived in him memories and reanimated thoughts that had perished under turmoil of the times" (Conway 11).[2] In the "Maiden Song of the Aeolian Harp," one of the entries in his last book of poetry, *Selected Poems*, published in 1876, Emerson writes from the point of view of the personified Aeolian harp itself, who declines to be played by a human hand:

> Keep your lips or finger-tips
> For flute or spinet's dancing chips;
> I await a tenderer touch
> I ask more or not so much:
> Give me to the atmosphere. (*SP* 176)

The Aeolian harp, which is also called a wind-harp by Emerson, is named after Aeolus, the Greek god of the winds. An Aeolian harp from the period 1860-1879 may be described as follows: "a rectangular box with strings crossing a bridge at either end, and a lid hooking over the strings and admitting the air" (Grigson 24). Invented as a stringed wooden box by Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, it was adapted for the window casement by the Scottish violin player, James Oswald (24-25).

Sitting in the window casement, the harp produces music, or it may be positioned in the branches of a tree. Geoffrey Grigson refers to the vibrating strings as "nature's music, made audible" (29) and as "the perfect music of eternity" (44), and Edgar Allan Poe once mentioned the Aeolian harp as "one of his sources of 'supernal beauty'" (qtd. in Grigson 43). These instruments may be viewed today in museums, purchased as novelties from a specialty catalogue, or found displayed at special events. One modern version of an Aeolian harp is the twelve-foot Venture wind harp made by sculptor Rodney Carroll.[3]

As a prelude to writing his Aeolian harp poetry, Emerson, the recent Harvard graduate, focused upon the relationship between the poet, the harp, and the heavens. In a notebook, Emerson wrote about the importance of the lyre in an untitled poem that describes the efforts of the poet/bard to experience enlightenment on both a physical and spiritual level:

> I spread my gorgeous sail
> Upon a starless sea,
> And oer the deep with a chilly gale
> My painted bark sailed fast & free —

Old ocean shook his waves
Beneath the roaring wind,
But the little keel of the mariner braves
The foaming abyss, & the midnight blind.

The firmament darkened overhead,
Below, the surges swelled, —
My bark ran low in the watery bed,
As the tempest breath its course compelled.

I took my silver lyre,
And waked its voice on high; —
The wild blasts were hushed to admire,
The stars looked out from the charmed sky. (*Poetry Notebooks* 11-12)[4]

Drawing upon the magical power granted to the bard,[5] Emerson causes nature to "admire" the harp's voice, silence the dark threatening storm, and restore the calm starlit seas. This is analogous to Emerson's own transition out of physical and spiritual darkness into a period of spiritual enlightenment and growth as a writer during the 1820s. This starlight, suggesting the presence of divine unity and insight, flows through the beauty-seeking soul.

On May 26, 1837, Emerson described the light of the Over-Soul in a journal entry:

> A certain wandering light comes to me which I instantly perceive to be the Cause of Causes. It transcends all proving.… I have known that I existed directly from God, and am, as it were, his organ. And in my ultimate consciousness Am He. Then, secondly, the contradictory fact is familiar, that I am a surprised spectator & learner of all my life. This is the habitual posture of the mind-beholding. (*Emerson in His Journals* 165)

Here, Emerson explains that he feels God within him, and he knows this intuitively. Echoing the philosopher Immanuel Kant, Emerson says that knowledge of God "transcends all proving." He knows that he must seek God in nature during his life through the process of reasoning that he describes as the posture of "mind-beholding." Emerson's true poet must glean knowledge from nature and then fulfill the role of sayer, who communicates his sapience with poetry, so that others will seek truth in nature.

The essay "Nature" describes the connection of a man's soul to the "Universal Soul" through the beauty that exists in nature. Emerson states that the "perception of natural forms is a delight" (*CW* 1:13), and that a "Universal Soul" of "justice, truth, love, freedom" may be found in nature (1:18). He calls the Universal Soul reason, and reason viewed in its relationship with nature becomes spirit, "the

Creator." Man studies the relationships of all objects in order to comprehend the unity of nature (1:19).

In his essay "Beauty," Emerson says, "Beauty is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world" (*Conduct* 289). The man who best represents beauty for Emerson is the poet, and the instrument that best represents beauty is the harp. Following the Orphic tradition, Emerson often depicts the poet with a lute or a harp. When a man joins the essence of his soul with a stringed instrument, he creates art in the form of music. In his essay "The Poet," Emerson explains this creative synthesis: "When the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she [genius] detaches and sends away from it its poems or songs … clad with wings…. These wings are the beauty of the poet's soul" (*CW* 3:14).

According to Susan Roberson, Emerson views the beauty in nature as secondary to its spiritual role. She explains, "nature becomes for the genuine man not so much landscape as a place for communion with the Divine Spirit" (29). It is important to review Emerson's concept of how we recognize beauty in order to understand why he would find it difficult to believe that a sinful poet could convey a universal message. According to Emerson:

> We do not know … why one feature or gesture enchants, why one word or syllable intoxicates; but the fact is familiar that the fine touch of the eye, or a grace of manners, or a phrase of poetry, plants wings at our shoulders; as if the Divinity, in his approaches, lifts away mountains of obstruction, deigns to draw a truer line, which the mind knows and owns. ("Beauty" in *Conduct* 289)

Even a successful poet may write flawed verses that lack beauty by Emerson's standards. The individual senses the "Divinity" of expression in a form intuitively because the beautiful carries with it a certain universal or spiritual character that the mind recognizes. Every object that has something in it that is "not private, but universal," is part of "the soul of nature" and is therefore beautiful (289).

A single disproportionate feature can interrupt the equilibrium of beauty. In an 1868 journal entry, Emerson explains that a handsome man "venting democratic politics" becomes "mean and paltry," and the natural handsomeness of his expression is marred (*JMN* 16:86). However, if the handsome man exhibits genteel manners, beauty is restored. And sometimes beauty is dependent upon its proper integration into the scheme of nature, or as Emerson said in his poem "Each and All," "the perfect whole" (*Collected Poems* 10). In this poem, seashells that are beautiful and fragrant on the beach become ugly and malodorous when taken away from their natural surroundings (9). The soul and the perceptive mind seek beauty in nature. The mind in a perceptive state can sense beauty in the song of the poet or the melody of the wind harp that flows with the breeze. When the mind cor-

rectly processes the message of the poet or harp, the divine part of man achieves unity with a larger Divinity, the Over-Soul, and he becomes an organ of God. In contrast, the sinful poet cannot achieve this status because of his flawed and discordant expression.

Emerson raises the motif of a man with a harp who performs miraculous acts in "Merlin I" (1837):

> The kingly bard
> Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
> As with hammer or with mace;
> That they may render back
> Artful thunder, which conveys
> Secrets of the solar tract,
> Sparks of the supersolar blaze.
> Merlin's blows are strokes of fate,
> Chiming with the forest tone,
> When boughs buffet boughs in the wood. (*CP* 91)

Merlin's thunder-like strokes convey both universal "secrets" and messages of "fate." The poet/bard, according to Emerson's philosophy, should function as a seer and a "sayer" who helps men to understand the spiritual realm and "the underlying unity in the universe between God, man, and nature" (Anderson 32). This early image of the bard Merlin differs from Emerson's later poetic portrayal of King Arthur's Merlin, who appears locked in a chamber of air inside a harp:

> Who but loved the wind-harp's note?
> How should not the poet dote
> on its mystic tongue,
> With its primeval memory
> Reporting what old minstrels told
> Of Merlin locked the harp within, —
> Merlin paying the pain of sin,
> Pent in a dungeon made of air, —
> And some attain his voice to hear, —
> Words of pain and cries of fear,
> But pillowed all on melody,
> As fits the griefs of bards to be. ("The Harp" in *SP* 121-22)

The image of Merlin in his poem "The Harp" may have been influenced by Tennyson's stories. Emerson read the *Idylls of the King* published by Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1859 (Yoder 147-148). In the *Idylls*, Tennyson describes how Merlin falls victim to the seduction of the cloying and badgering Vivien, who imprisons him in a tree. She recites this "tender rhyme" to trick Merlin: "The little rift within the lover's lute / Or little pitted speck in garner'd fruit / That rotting inward slowly

moulders all" (Tennyson 159-160). Vivien deceives Merlin by feigning love, and she suggests in this rhyme that his mistrust of her will lead to his own decay. Of course, the lines are ironic because trusting Vivien eventually does lead to Merlin's imprisonment and certain decay. According to Yoder, Vivien's song also foreshadows the "fall of Merlin" and the decay of Camelot (148).

The wise harp, in Emerson's poem, sings with a "mystic tongue" of the sinful poet Merlin, who may be heard only as a voice of "fear" and "pain." Emerson chooses to portray Merlin confined within the harp. This choice may suggest the dominance and superiority of the harp over the sinful poet in this situation. "Merlin locked the harp within,—/ Merlin paying the pain of sin" (*SP* 122). Merlin still speaks to a few, but his message has lost some of its power.

The imprisoned poet Merlin represents man in his fallen state; Merlin bears the stain of sin, and he cannot perfectly relay the message of the Over-Soul to his audience. Today's poet may fall into a similar disharmony as a result of his failure to express a sense of unity with the spiritual world. Merlin's disharmony with nature in "The Harp" is described as a confinement that restricts his freedom of expression, but the Aeolian harp, personified as man in a sinless state, continues to transmit the message of the Over-Soul with greater harmony and beauty than the fallen poet Merlin can do. For these reasons, the Aeolian harp, which is called a wind-harp in this poem, is closer to Emerson's ideal of beauty than is the sinful poet.

Near the end of the poem, Emerson names a number of poets of genius who have not equaled the wind-harp's ability to convey nature's song (*SP* 122-23). This statement should not be considered a disparagement of these great poets. "The Aeolian harp evidenced the divine harmony of all things" to the mature Emerson (Matteson 6), so it would be difficult for a human poet to consistently produce poetry on that level. However, like the human poet, the harp also has some limitations to its powers. Age does not cloud [the harp's] memory" (*SP* 120), nor does the harp age and decay as does the poet, but the Aeolian harp does not perform the miraculous acts associated with the bardic lore[6] that Emerson portrayed in his poem "Merlin's Song":

> Of Merlin wise I learned a song, —
> Sing it low, or sing it loud,
> It is mightier than the strong
> And punishes the proud.
> …
> In the heart of the music peals a strain
> Which only angels hear;
> Whether it waken joy or rage,

> Hushed myriads hark in vain,
> Yet they who hear it shed their age,
> And take their youth again. (*May-Day* 96)

In this verse, the person who sings Merlin's magical song restores the youth of men. In contrast, the desire of man for miracles remains unfulfilled in "The Harp." The narrator breathes "Elysian air" when he hears the harp's song (*SP* 124), but the renewal remains temporary, and the music creates longings that the poet Emerson loves and celebrates but cannot bring into fulfillment (Bidney 340-341).

Although Emerson acknowledges the limitations placed upon him by nature, he believes that the man who focuses too much upon his own fate makes himself weak. In his essay "Fate" he states that "intellect annuls fate" (*Conduct* 27). When he becomes disillusioned, he looks at the situation from different angles until he finds an optimistic point of view.

In his essay "Experience" he compares man to a piece of Labrador spar, a multicolored mineral, that he turns in his hands until he sees a spark of light that symbolizes a man's best talents (*CW* 3:33). Emerson explains that the most successful men manage to keep themselves in that light where their talents may be best utilized (3:33).

Emerson had a talent for convincing men to look for insight and beauty in nature even when it is difficult to find them in poetry. In 1851, he wrote the following comment about the poet in his journal: "Ah, when! Ah, how rarely! Can he draw a true Aeolian note from the harp" (*JMN* 11:373). The Aeolian harp "trembles to the cosmic breath" and "speaks not of self that mystic tone / but of the Overgods alone" ("The Harp" in *SP* 122). Rather than focusing on the shortcomings of men in his later poetry, Emerson urges people to find harmony in nature through a conduit such as Aeolian harp music.

The two Aeolian harp poems that appear in *Selected Poems*, "The Harp" and "The Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp," are an indication of Emerson's concept of beauty during the final twenty-five years of his life. Some critics have assumed that aphasia, a type of forgetfulness, prevented him from working unaided on his poetry during this time, but a recent article discusses and documents how Emerson wrote and edited *Selected Poems*, Emerson's last book of published poetry.[7]

"The Harp" was originally part of the "May-Day" poem published in 1867. "The Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp" had not appeared previously in his books.[8] In each of these poems, the Aeolian harp plays without the help of the poet. Emerson selected poems for this book and continued to revise it and to make other editorial changes until *Selected Poems* appeared in print in 1876. Shortening

the title to "Aeolian Harp, Maiden Speech," Emerson listed it as number forty-six in a series of sixty-two poems he planned to include in the book (*Poetry Notebooks* 582-583).

In 1868, many years prior to the publication of *Selected Poems*, Emerson had presented this poem to his married daughter Edith along with the gift of an Aeolian harp (Engel 89). The harp's speech reveals emotions of hopefulness and serenity:

> Where is the wind my brother—where?
> Lift the sash, lay me within,
> Lend me your ears, and I begin.
> For gentle harp to gentle hearts
> The secret of the world imparts
> And not to-day and not to-morrow
> Can drain its wealth of hope and sorrow;
> But day by day, to loving ear
> Unlocks new sense and loftier cheer
> I've come to live with you sweet friends,
> This home my minstrel journeying ends.
> Many and subtle are my lays,
> The latest better than the first.
> For I can mend the happiest days,
> And charm the anguish of the worst. (*SP* 176)

The Aeolian harp sits on the window casement and sings about its powers. The harp "imparts" the world's secrets and cheers the hearts of friends.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the aging poet, continued to look for the light of the Over-Soul and the divinity of beauty near the end of his writing career, choosing the Aeolian harp as a representation of divine beauty and purity. Over the years, the Aeolian harp merited a physical presence in Emerson's home and a literary presence in his poetry, journals, and essays. Emerson records his affection for the harp many times in his journals. For example in 1861 he writes: "What a joy I found & still find in the Aeolian harp!" (*Emerson in His Journals* 493). A friend of the family, Mary Miller Engel, writes that the Emersons owned a "mahogany Aeolian harp," that had been given to Lydian by her brother Charles T. Jackson (Engel 89), and Emerson's son Edward describes the wind harp as one of the sounds his father loved best (E. Emerson 172).

Although Emerson emphasizes man's fallibility and mortality in his poem "The Harp," he retains his faith in the message of the Over-Soul. The rise and decline of an Orphic poet such as Merlin does not bar the opportunity for new poets to take his place. According to an earlier Emerson essay, "The Poet," if women and

men "can penetrate into that region where the air is music," hear the poetry that was written before the beginning of time, and write these words down, they too can be poets, and the best of their poetry, although "imperfect," will become "the songs of the nations" (*CW* 3:5-6).

Throughout his life, Emerson emphasized different ways of harmonizing with the Over-Soul. He begins by describing the power of the bard to hush the wild wind, gain the approbation of nature, and bring forth the starlight. He later speaks of the power of the lyre-playing bard to convey the secrets of the universe or to perform miracles. Finally, he emphasizes that the message of the Over-Soul will always be available through some pure source, even when the sinful bard cannot convey the uplifting message. And he portrays the Aeolian harp as a symbol of such a source. Ralph Waldo Emerson sends a message to all of mankind with his writings about the Aeolian harp: he advises men and women to avoid discord in their lives and to seek beauty and unity in nature. The qualities of divine harmony and beauty can always be found in nature, if one knows intuitively where to look for them. ❋

Notes

[1] Emerson's depiction of the Orphic poet is chronicled by R.A. Yoder in *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America*.

[2] I am grateful to the staff at the Concord Museum and the Emerson house for supplying me with information about Emerson's family and friends to document Emerson's affection for the Aeolian harp.

[3] A twelve-foot high Aeolian harp named Venture has been built for the campus of the University of South Carolina, Aiken. It is displayed outside on special occasions to document a literary period and illustrate scientific principles. See *Henry Gurr, Professor of Physics* <http://pacer1.usa.sc.edu/hsg/> (11 June 2000). The Venture harp was inspired by a paper written by poet-philosopher Owen Barfield. See "The Harp and the Camera," *The Rediscovery of Meaning* (New York: Wesleyan Press, 1977). Barfield considered the Aeolian harp to be "an emblem" of the Romantic era (69). A large, electronic Aeolian harp, such as the Venture harp, would have the potential to emit a much lower pitched sound than the wooden-box Aeolian harps owned by Emerson.

[4] Any unusual capitalization practices in the poetry and prose passages cited in this article have been eliminated for the sake of uniformity. This particular poem, dated 1822 by Emerson, was copied into his Charleston, S.C., St. Augustine, FLA. notebook.

[5] See "The Potent Song in Emerson's Merlin Poems," *Philological Quarterly* 32 (1953): 22-28. Kenneth Cameron's article comments about the influence of the bardic

lore and miraculous bardic runes (songs). “The inspired poetry or music has the power to transform life within and without” (28). According to Cameron, Emerson borrowed books from the Boston Library in both 1821 and 1847 that contained information about the runic bard (23, 27).

[6] It is possible to argue that Emerson’s poet Merlin was once in unity with the spiritual world. See Robert Matteson, “Emerson and the Aeolian Harp.” However, it cannot be decided with certainty whether Emerson wanted his readers to associate his other Merlin poems (“Merlin I,” “Merlin II,” and “Merlin’s Song”) with King Arthur’s Merlin. It is likely, however, that in these poems he referred to a poet of the bardic tradition named Merlin whose powers were connected with those in nature.

[7] See Joseph M. Thomas, “Late Emerson: Selected Poems and the Emerson Factory.” Emerson continued to work on his poetry even after his family began editing his essays for publication. Thomas states that Emerson’s last book of poetry, *Selected Poems*, “was not an artifact constructed by others” (973). Relying upon published and unpublished documents left by Emerson, his editors, and family members, Thomas presents the position that *Selected Poems* represents Emerson’s “own identity as a writer at the end of his career” (973). A few editorial decisions may have been initiated by others, such as to have excerpts taken from his poem “May-Day” to be presented as “May-Day” and “The Harp” for publication in *Selected Poems*. However, “The Harp” can still be considered one of Emerson’s late poems based upon its prior publication date as part of “May-Day” in 1867.

[8] See footnote 39 of Thomas’ article “Late Emerson: Selected Poems and the Emerson Factory.” The poems included in *Selected Poems* that had never before been published include “April Cupido,” “Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp,” “The Nun’s Aspiration,” and an excerpt from “May-Day” retitled, with some alterations, as “The Harp.”

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