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# Emerson Rejects Reed and Hails Thoreau

Carl F. Strauch

## I

IN 1903 Edward Waldo Emerson printed, in a note to *Representative Men*, the six opening lines of an unpublished poem by his father on Sampson Reed, the Swedenborgian druggist, whose *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (1826) had exerted such a marked influence on the elder Emerson's philosophic maturing; and again in 1949 in his biography Professor Rusk quoted the first three lines in the midst of a brief and unsatisfactory statement on the matter.<sup>1</sup> Sutcliffe, Hotson, and especially Cameron have copiously documented Emerson's indebtedness to Reed, and Cameron has thoroughly explored the rift between them.<sup>2</sup> But the poem in question is the most considerable treatment of the rift from Emerson's point of view and, moreover, sheds light not only on the quarrel but also, like "The Skeptic," which I printed with commentary in 1957, on the intellectual and emotional turmoil of Emerson's experimental period (1838-1845).<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, an Emersonian document of significance, challenging, except in literary merit, both the "Divinity School Address" and the lecture and essay on Montaigne. Serene in expression and accomplished in form, the first of these opens the period, and the second closes it with a like serenity in a statement of balanced affirmations and negations;<sup>4</sup> but neither discloses the personal side that Emcer-

<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Centenary Edition, Boston, 1903-04), IV, 295; also *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1949), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> Emerson Grant Sutcliffe, *Emerson's Theories of Literary Expression*, Univ. of Illinois Studies in Lang. and Lit., VIII (Urbana, 1923), 127-128; Clarence Paul Hotson, "Sampson Reed, a Teacher of Emerson," *New England Quarterly*, II (April, 1929), 249-277; Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist*, I (Raleigh, 1945), 253-294. This last work will hereafter be cited as *ETE*.

<sup>3</sup> "The Importance of Emerson's Skeptical Mood," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, XI (Winter, 1957), 117-139.

<sup>4</sup> Emerson read his lecture on Montaigne in Boston, January 1, 1846; see *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph Leslie Rusk (New York, 1939), III, 306, n. 100.

son habitually eliminated or softened in public performances like these or like others of this fascinating period — "Circles," "Experience," and "Uriel." We get this personal side in the poem on Reed — a sharply worded disillusionment, edged with anger and satire, followed by a fervid plea to a "noblest youth" to inspire as Reed once had. For this reason the poem is worth having in print.<sup>5</sup>

The first and rough draft, in pencil, without title, sparsely punctuated, and showing much revision, occurs on pages 259-261 of verse-book *P*. This draft appears also in typescript on a folded, unlined white sheet inserted between pages 60-61 of verse-book *NP*. Presumably made by Edward Waldo Emerson, the typescript contains his punctuation, minor verbal corrections, and some errors of transcription. The title "Samson Reed" [sic] is added in ink. Emerson's own improved draft, with the title "S.R.," is written in ink on both sides of a sheet of gray unlined paper inserted between pages 96-97 of the fair copy verse-book *Rhymer*. Following is an exact copy of this draft; words or portions of words stricken out are enclosed in pointed brackets, and variants are put between slanting lines. Other editorial matters are footnoted. For convenience in discussion numbering is supplied to the right.

[First side]

S.R.

Demure apothecary

Whose early reverend genius my young eye  
 With wonder followed, & undoubting joy,  
 Believing in that cold & modest form  
 Brooded alway the everlasting mind, 5  
 And that thou faithful didst obey the soul,<sup>a</sup>  
 So should the splendid favour of the God  
 From thine observed lips shower words of fire,  
 Pictures that cast before the common eye,  
 I know for <sup>b</sup> mine, & all men know for theirs. 10  
 How is the fine gold dim! the lofty low!  
 And thou, reputed speaker for the soul,  
 Forgoest the matchless benefit, & now,  
 Slick deacon of the New Jerusalem,  
 Thou hast defied the offering world to be 15  
 A blind man's blind man.

<sup>a</sup>The word "soul" is superimposed upon "God," which is obliterated by an ink smear.

<sup>b</sup>The letter "f" is superimposed upon "m."

<sup>c</sup>I wish to thank the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, through Mr. Edward Waldo Forbes, for permission to print the poem.

Was it not worth ambition  
 To be the bard of nature to these times  
 With words like things,  
 An universal speech that did present 20  
 All natural creatures, and the eye beheld  
 A lake, a rosetree, when he named their names?  
 [Second side] And better was it to cower before the phantoms  
 One self deceiving mystic drew in swarms  
 Wherever rolled his visionary eye, 25  
 The (sombre) /Swedish/ Pluto of a world of ghosts,  
 Eyes without light, men without character,  
 Nature a cave(rn) of theologians? ———

And lo! the young men of the land  
 Decline the strife of virtue, fail to be 30  
 The bringers of glad thought, preferring ease  
 Ease & irresolution & the (smile) wine<sup>c</sup>  
 Of placid rich men, they consent to be  
 Danglers & dolls. With these, not thou, not thou  
 O noblest youth, not thou wilt there remain! 35  
 Up! for thy life, & for thy people's life!

And be the sun's light & the rainbow's glow,  
 And by the power of picture, to the eye  
 Show wherefore it was made. Unlock  
 The world of sound to the astonished ear, 40  
 And thus by thee shall man be twice a man.  
 Were it not better than to boast thyself  
 Father of fifty sons, flesh of thy flesh,  
 Rather to live earth's better bachelor  
 Planting ethereal seed in souls, 45  
 Spreading abroad thy being in the being  
 Of men whom thou dost foster & inform,  
 Fill with new hopes & shake with grand desires?

The most significant improvement in the *Rhymer* sheet over *P* occurs with lines 29–34 of the text here printed, which are a condensation of the following nine and a half lines in *P*:

And lo the young men of the land  
 Born to transmit with added light the torch  
 Received in long succession from the sires  
 Decline the strife of virtue, fail to be  
 Redeemers of the lost degeneracy  
 The bringers of glad thought, the glad & vast

<sup>c</sup> The word "wine" is superimposed upon "of placid rich," obliterated by an ink smear.

(And stout revolters) preferring ease  
Ease and irresolution and the smile  
Of placid rich men they consent to be  
Danglers & dolls. *Etc.*

Apart from the gain in tightened expression, Emerson's omission of the second, third, and fifth lines above from the final draft strengthened the argument of the poem — the divine inspiration of the soul in the present.

Since biographical, philosophical, and psychological questions are involved in understanding "S.R." it will be essential to lay before the reader a brief sketch of Sampson Reed's career, an account of Emerson's interest in Reed's writings, especially *Growth of the Mind*, a discussion of the chief ideas in that work, an analysis of Emerson's poem, and finally reasons for the rejection of Reed together with circumstantial evidence for the year of composition and for the identity of the "noblest youth."

My analysis of "S.R." will follow the two-part structure of the poem itself. In the first part Emerson rejects Reed because Reed has become narrowly sectarian and complacent in his wealth. The rejection turns upon Reed's own doctrines in *Growth of the Mind*, now presumably forgotten in the man's comfortable middle age. In the second part Emerson drops the attack on Reed and exhorts a "noblest youth" to be true to the idealistic vision to which Emerson is still committed; and the contrast between youth and middle age links the two parts.

As I shall suggest below, Emerson wrote the poem probably in the summer of 1838, and his "noblest youth" may have been Henry David Thoreau.

## II

"S.R." inscribes a belated *finis* to a young man's discipleship. At his own graduation on August 21, 1821, Emerson heard with pleasure Sampson Reed deliver his "Oration on Genius" for the degree of Master of Arts. Through his brother William, Emerson subsequently borrowed the MS and copied it.<sup>6</sup> In 1826, when Reed published his *Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, Emerson enthusiastically enrolled himself in the ranks of followers to a young man only three years his senior.

<sup>6</sup> See *Letters*, I, 306, n. 64; III, 74, n. 282. Also *Life*, p. 87, and *EFE*, I, 255; II, 9-11 (for the text of the oration).

The ideological relation between Emerson and Reed is only one of the more prominent instances of the intellectual and religious ferment that was going on in the minds of young people in the Boston community. It is true that the influence of Coleridge and Carlyle on Emerson was more lasting than Reed's; but Coleridge's was exerted exclusively through the printed word, and Carlyle's, though personal as well as literary, came later than Reed's. The influence of Reed was, moreover, a threefold one: his writings were abundant and readily available, not only in his masterpiece, *Growth of the Mind*, but also in the influential *New Jerusalem Magazine*; he lived in Boston and might be encountered for discussion; and the doctrines he expounded were visibly expressed in a growing institution, the Swedenborgian Church. When Emerson visited Carlyle in 1833 (and incidentally mentioned Reed to him<sup>7</sup>) he had already reached his decision to abandon the pulpit. Before his European trip, however, Emerson had been increasingly exercised over the question of one's vocation and, influenced by Reed, he considered the problem in terms of the Swedenborgian doctrine of "uses"; and Emerson's poem, written years later, underscores the importance of the doctrine. But if this quest for one's true place and function in life was the heart of the matter for Emerson and several of his young disciples in the 1830's and 1840's, so had it been for Sampson Reed somewhat earlier.

Sampson Reed was born in Bridgewater (now West Bridgewater), Massachusetts, on June 10, 1800, the son of the Reverend John Reed, a Unitarian clergyman in the community for half a century, who had also served in Congress during the Presidency of Washington.<sup>8</sup> Sampson graduated from Harvard with the class of 1818 and then spent three years in the Divinity School. Having meanwhile been converted to the teachings of Swedenborg by a room-mate, Thomas Worcester, he did not complete his theological studies, and he abandoned the idea of becoming a preacher because, as he said, "the number of those who believe as I did, was too small to afford me any prospect of success in that profession."

For some time he taught school in Boston, considered studying medi-

<sup>7</sup> This is to be inferred from Emerson's first letter to Carlyle, May 14, 1834. See *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. Joseph Slater (New York, 1964), p. 100. Hereafter cited as E-C.

<sup>8</sup> *EFE*, I, 253, n. 1, carefully presents the sources for Reed's biography. Any student of the relation between Emerson and Reed should start with *EFE*, I, 253 ff., and II, 209-211, 219-220, for the facts of Reed's life.

cine, but finally became a clerk in a drugstore owned by William B. White, where he remained until 1825, when he established his own retail drug business. Subsequently, in partnership with Dr. Abram T. Lowe, he converted it into a wholesale firm. In January 1861 he retired and gave his interest in the firm to his son Thomas.

In addition to his business Sampson Reed engaged in many public activities, being at various times a bank director and a member of the Board of Aldermen, the School Committee for Boston, the State Legislature, and the State Constitutional Convention. He was prominent in the affairs of his own sect, and the list of his contributions to the *New Jerusalem Magazine* is an impressive testimony to his interest in every aspect of church doctrine and activity. His career must have been gratifying to himself, his friends, his church, and his community. When he died in 1880, an obituary commented on the early conversion of a number of young men to the Swedenborgian faith, of whom Reed had been one. "With hardly an exception these young men became prosperous and even wealthy . . . ." <sup>9</sup> About forty years earlier, in the poem before us, Emerson made his private notation on the spiritual consequences for young men who "decline the strife of virtue" and prefer "the wine of placid rich men."

A Swedenborgian Society had been organized in April 1817,<sup>10</sup> and in the following year Thomas Worcester, who had begun reading Swedenborg in the summer of 1816 while still an undergraduate at Harvard, was chosen "Leader." Starting with twelve members, the Society was officially organized as a church on August 15, 1818 by the Rev. Mr. Carll of the Philadelphia Society, and in February 1823 it was incorporated by the State Legislature, Thomas Worcester being subsequently ordained pastor on August 17, 1828. The *New Jerusalem Magazine*, a powerful organ for the propagation of doctrine and views, made its first appearance in September 1827.

Admitted to church membership on August 15, 1820, Sampson Reed seriously applied the doctrine of "uses" to himself, for Swedenborg taught that secular occupations have spiritual value and significance. In two letters (March 6 and May 31, 1823) to his friend Theophilus Par-

<sup>9</sup> *New Jerusalem Messenger*, XXXIX (September 22, 1880), 161.

<sup>10</sup> This and subsequent facts of the organization of the Swedenborgian Society are to be found in *A Sketch of the History of the Boston Society of the New Jerusalem* (Boston, 1863), pp. 4-12, based on Sampson Reed's historical survey in the *New Jerusalem Magazine*, XI (December, 1837), 118-127.

sons, Jr., Reed disclosed his vocational unrest, for he saw a gap between his clerking in White's apothecary shop and what he felt his attainments were. "It is but lately," he said, "that I have thought I could discover in my own mind, any thing like an essential, incipient use, by which the two things will be united." It is obvious that this young man was exploring not the main chance, but his mind for that *peculium*, the unique talent that, in Swedenborgian doctrine, each possesses; and Reed's language is conscientious and discriminating. No doubt impelled by this search for his "use," he wrote *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* at odd moments during the intervals of business in Mr. White's shop. He first offered the writing to the *North American Review*, but Jared Sparks, the editor, declined it and advised its publication as a separate volume.<sup>11</sup>

### III

"Tis droll," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson to his brother William on September 29, 1826, shortly after the book appeared, "but it was all writ in the shop." But if the circumstances were droll, as they were likely to be in a provincial America lacking the cultural resources of an aristocratic Europe, the results, so the young enthusiast went on to say, were sublime, for Reed's *Growth of the Mind* was a "noble pamphlet after my own heart . . . in my poor judgment the best thing since Plato of Plato's kind, for novelty & wealth of truth." With disingenuous candor Emerson added, "It ought to give him Frisbie's chair." Levi Frisbie had been Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity at Harvard, and the chair had been vacant for four years.<sup>12</sup>

We have no way of knowing whether the always equable William shared his brother's enthusiasm for Reed, but from his redoubtable Aunt Mary, Ralph received the not infrequent rebuff. In a letter, September 25, 1826, replying to his of September 23, she ridiculed Reed's *Growth of the Mind* for triteness, obscurity, and "swedenishness," crediting the rare ideas in the pamphlet to Wordsworth.<sup>13</sup> But Emerson's interest was at this time so great that it swept him into the Swedenborgian orbit; and as his biographer Rusk says, he became "in-

<sup>11</sup> James Reed, preface to *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (Boston, 1886), p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, I, 176.

<sup>13</sup> *Letters*, I, xxxiv; 173, n. 21.



volved with the local Swedenborgians, then, it seems, on the lookout for at least a temporary pastor. There was some sort of 'gregarious invitation to the New Church' which he 'was agreeably disappointed' to find himself saved from."<sup>14</sup> Years later, in a journal entry (January 6, 1835) on his attending services at the Swedenborgian Chapel in Boston, he wrote that he had observed to Reed that the sermon, except at one point, would not have disturbed congregations in any other church.<sup>15</sup>

Emerson's desire to spread a knowledge of Reed beyond his own family circle among those of like mind offers perhaps the first instance of a life-long habit of searching for the original expression of universal truths; and as subsequent events show, Emerson's disillusionment with the limitations of personality in no way lessened his abiding respect for the ideas themselves and in very little measure affected his estimate of the worth of the man's attainments. Inevitably, in May 1834, Emerson sent a copy of *Growth of the Mind* to Carlyle, for, as he said to an old college mate, Benjamin Peter Hunt, likewise an early admirer of Reed, "in very different costume" Reed and Carlyle "are of one faith."<sup>16</sup> When on June 28, 1836, in a letter to his brother William, Emerson states that his own little book, *Nature*, is very nearly done and that it will not exceed *Growth of the Mind*,<sup>17</sup> the student of this intellectual relationship who has followed both Hotson and Cameron in their close exposition senses that Emerson's discipleship has culminated in the liberation of poetic genius and the expression of Romantic naturalism. Professor Cameron has demonstrated that doctrinally *Nature* echoes much in *Growth of the Mind*; but one cannot wholly accept Hotson's view that "this book [*Growth of the Mind*] gave Emerson his first definite literary impulse, and largely influenced both the form and the content of his first publication, *Nature*."<sup>18</sup> In the light of Cameron's definitive exposition of *Nature*, embracing sources other than Reed, this claim is too sweeping; and the form of *Nature*, like that of other Romantic masterpieces, is *sui generis*. Yet the influence is substantial, and Emerson's respect for the ideas and the man survived the disillusionment recorded in the poem, for in a letter to his brother William, as late as October 26, 1842, Emerson recorded his pleasure with an

<sup>14</sup> *Life*, p. 126; *Letters*, I, 229.

<sup>15</sup> *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), V, 4. Hereafter cited as *JMN*.

<sup>16</sup> *E-C*, p. 100; *Letters*, I, 433.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters*, II, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Hotson, p. 276.

intellectual community that included Reed: "Yesterday in Boston I met Horatio Greenough the sculptor just arrived from Italy & had some talk with him; presently after with Bancroft, also in the street. Before I left town, I met Sampson Reed in the street & talked with him; then Sam. Ward; then George Bradford; then Theodore Parker; and came away thinking Boston streets not the meanest places, when I could find in them six such gossips as these in one walk."<sup>19</sup>

## IV

Certainly, *Growth of the Mind*, whatever its Swedenborgian impress, is a minor classic of Romantic naturalism; and if it stands in a close relationship to Emerson's *Nature* it is also close to Wordsworth's *Prelude* in its faithful delineation of the unfolding and expansion of the human spirit.

Reed's purpose was to establish a basis for church doctrine in the metaphysical structure of the universe, in the dualism that saw man as microcosm faithfully reflecting the spiritual truths of the macrocosm. Reed began with an assertion, wholly acceptable to Emerson, of fixed laws of mind, "as fixed and perfect as the laws of matter," but above and independent of time and place.<sup>20</sup> In conformity with the Romantic spirit of the new century, Reed rejected Locke's view of the mind as a *tabula rasa* and attributed vast potentialities to it because, as he said, it was filled with "the immediate presence and agency of God."<sup>21</sup> Reed's metaphysics became a psychology when he introduced the organic metaphor in his further statement that "the mind must grow, not from an external accretion, but from an internal principle." The mind, he continued, "possesses a character and a principle of freedom, which *should be* respected, and *cannot* be destroyed."<sup>22</sup> Hence the importance of observing the growth of the mind from childhood to maturity and the necessity of the proper education for children. "It was the design of Providence," said Reed, "that the infant mind should possess the germ of every science. If it were not so, they should hardly be learned." "Do we love," he continued, "to gaze on the sun, the moon, the stars and the planets? This affection contains in its bosom the whole science of astronomy, as the seed contains the future tree." This

<sup>19</sup> *Letters*, III, 93-94.

<sup>20</sup> Sampson Reed, *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (Boston, 1826), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Reed, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Reed, p. 17 (Reed's italics).

epistemology embraces the view that since the universe is a dynamic organism, science must be taught as a living thing. In books, said Reed, science is presented to the student "in a dried and preserved state"; but the duty of the instructor is to awaken affection in the child and to "take him by the hand" into nature.<sup>23</sup>

Such a view of science is largely poetic and religious, for without poetry, which is "the soul of science," "the latter is a cheerless, heartless study." Reed effected a synthesis of science and poetry with religion. "When there shall be," he said, "a religion which shall see God in every thing, and at all times; and the natural sciences not less than nature itself, shall be regarded in connexion with Him — the fire of poetry will begin to be kindled in its immortal part, and will burn without consuming."<sup>24</sup>

Reed's thoroughgoing naturalism leads to speculatively bold affirmations about poetry, like science, as a reflection of nature. If Reed declared earlier in his treatise that the laws of mind are "as fixed and perfect as the laws of matter," he now declares, in the same way, that the laws of poetry "will be as fixed and immutable as the laws of science." But here Reed is not paradoxically invoking neo-classical rules, for his laws are to be found in the constitution of the natural order; and, in fact, Reed repudiates art entirely when he says that poetry is not versification or fiction and that rime is unnatural and possesses "too strongly the marks of art." Poetry must render the truth in "natural imagery," and the poet "should be free and unshackled as the eagle."<sup>25</sup>

In a remarkable passage, anticipating the more fully matured poetics of both Emerson and Whitman, Reed stresses the separate and unique existence and quality of every form of life — mind and matter — and strongly implies the symbolic nature of literary expression: "There is a language, not of words but of things. . . . But every thing which is, whether animal or vegetable, is full of the expression of that use for which it is designed, as of its own existence. . . . Let a man's language be confined to the expression of that which actually belongs to his own mind; and let him respect the smallest blade which grows and permit it to speak for itself." Reed's Neo-Platonic conclusion was that there can

<sup>23</sup> Reed, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Reed, pp. 22, 23-24. At about the same time Carlyle was making his synthesis of history, poetry, and religion.

<sup>25</sup> Reed, pp. 21, 25.

only be an unbroken chain from God "to the most inanimate parts of creation."<sup>26</sup>

Language, then, is essentially the expression of "use," in both a metaphysical and psychological sense — what, in these terms, you are for, what you can do; and with this doctrine Reed has disclosed the Swedenborgian tenor of his pamphlet. But a person's "use" or "peculium" is intimately related to his growth and his awareness of what his "character" may develop into. Since character is "yielding and pliable" it is left to each person to decide "how far it shall remain in its present form."<sup>27</sup> Essentially, then, the growth of a person's mind must disclose his "use," and "use" is simply the external application to life of our "character" or "internal principle." It is on this note that Reed vigorously brings his pamphlet to an end:

There is something which every one can do better than any one else; and it is the tendency and must be the end of human events, to assign to each his true calling. . . .

It becomes us then to seek and to cherish this *peculium* of our own minds, as the patrimony which is left us by our Father in heaven . . . as the forming power within us, which gives to our persons that by which they are distinguished from others — and by a life entirely governed by the commandments of God, to leave on the duties we are called to perform, the full impress of our real character.<sup>28</sup>

Emerson certainly sought and cherished and, perhaps with great injustice, felt that Reed had comfortably collapsed into sectarianism and affluence. This, at any rate, is the argument of the poem, to which we now turn.

## V

We may quickly pass over the bitter personal references to a middle-aged Reed. He is a "demure apothecary" (l. 1) and a "Sleek deacon of the New Jerusalem" (l. 14); and he is certainly one of the "placid rich men" (l. 33).

Emerson employed a controlling thematic contrast between youth

<sup>26</sup> Reed, pp. 24-25. See *ETE*, II, 10, for Reed's earlier statement in "Oration on Genius" (1821), "where words make one with things, and language is lost in nature." See Emerson's remark in *Nature* that "wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things," *Works*, I, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, pp. 40-41; see also *ETE*, I, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Reed, p. 42.

and middle age supported by imagery of light and dark; and he borrowed both the thematic contrast and the imagery from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Moreover, he borrowed a line from the Ode, but somewhat altered, and used it, as we shall presently see, in his attack. On the title page of *Growth of the Mind* Reed himself had quoted a passage from Wordsworth's *Excursion* (IV, 1264-1270), the opening lines of which are relevant here:

So build we up the Being that we are;  
Thus deeply drinking-in the Soul of Things  
We shall be wise perforce . . .

More than a decade after the printing of his pamphlet Reed, apparently, was no longer interested in how we build up our Being. In Wordsworth's Ode the "little Child" is an "Eye among the blind," the "growing Boy" "Beholds the light," and the "Youth" "still is Nature's Priest" accompanied by "the vision splendid." "Shades of the prison-house" close in, and

At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day.

Finally, "those truths" that the child has seen are lost in "darkness . . . the darkness of the grave."<sup>29</sup> This, in Emerson's argument, had happened to Reed.

Emerson's "young eye" had followed Reed's "early reverend genius,"

Believing in that cold and modest form  
Brooded alway the everlasting mind,  
And that thou faithful didst obey the soul, [ll. 4-6]

These lines are based squarely upon Reed's affirmation in *Growth of the Mind* that "God is [in] every thing" and that the mind of man is filled with "the immediate presence and agency of God."<sup>30</sup> Line 5 is Emerson's adaptation of line 115 in the Ode, "Haunted forever by the eternal mind —"; but Emerson took "Broods" from line 121, changed the tense, and substituted it for "Haunted." In lines 11-15 of his poem Emerson laments that Reed has failed of his early promise, and in the second half, beginning with line 35, Emerson turns hopefully to a "noblest youth."

<sup>29</sup> See stanzas 5 and 8 of the "Ode."

<sup>30</sup> Reed, pp. 23, 16.

The two-part structure, suggested by the contrast between a middle-aged Reed and the youth, develops the imagery of light and dark impressively. The Swedenborgian world depicted in lines 23-28 is unreal, illusory, and dead. Reed has become "a blind man's blind man," Swedenborg has a "visionary eye" that beholds phantoms and ghosts, the eyes of his sectaries are "without light," and they are men "without character." Finally, Nature is "a cave of theologians." Emerson's use of the word "character" is an accusatory echo of Reed's use with the full meaning in *Growth of the Mind*, that each must develop his own individuality. Here, then, we have a telling indictment of Reed for abdicating his independence, the "internal principle of his mind," to be the servant of a "Swedish Pluto" in a realm of death. Emerson borrowed the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic* as the archetypal metaphor of unreality.

If, as I have suggested, Emerson secured the unity of his poem with a thematic contrast between youth and middle age, he established the doctrinal heart in lines 4-6, already quoted, the assertion that God is in man. When, therefore, divinely inspired man, in the guise of poet, speaks to humanity, his language is universally acknowledged as true (ll. 9-10, 20-22). The poet's words stand for things in nature, a lake or a rosetree; his names are no more, no less than what the things themselves really are, their own language or identity or "use" in the cosmic arrangement (to repeat the argument of *Growth of the Mind*). The function of the "bard of nature," which Reed has now declined, stands in sharp contrast to the sectarian preoccupation with phantoms and ghosts. The godlike power is that of Adam, to name, for the name is the use, and the use is the divine intention.

Hence, in the second part of the poem Emerson calls upon the "noblest youth" (ll. 38-39):

. . . by the power of picture, to the eye  
Show wherefore it was made. . . .

The significant advance in this third statement on "the power of picture" lies in going beyond the equivalence of words and things to the fundamental teleological argument that the whole purposive arrangement fits parts together harmoniously for their "use"; and for this argument, which stands behind these verses, Emerson did not depend on Reed but on Cudworth, as he had in "The Rhodora,"

Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being: <sup>81</sup>

In resorting to Cudworth, Emerson demonstrates his wide-ranging familiarity with the background of Swedenborg's vital truths, which, far from being a unique insight and a sectarian possession, belong to a stream of thought flowing down to the nineteenth century from antiquity.

When Emerson addresses himself to the young man he goes beyond the set of contrasts that we have already observed — between youth and middle age, light and dark, reality and illusion; he adds complexity and depth in suggesting a further contrast to round out his poem. In line 37 the youth not only has the power to make us see but himself becomes “the sun's light and the rainbow's glow” — an enhancement and aggrandizement of the human being impossible in the “Swedish Pluto's” cavernous realm. Further, though Emerson depends upon imagery of the eye to develop his contrast between reality and illusion, in line 40 he brings in the “world of sound” as an enhancement of the world of sight; thus as he says in line 41, man is “twice a man.” In this development of the poem Emerson suggests his source reading on Plato's “Universal Man” and Swedenborg's own “Greatest Man.” <sup>82</sup> On this theme the poem faithfully reflects intent and statement in both *Nature* and “Self-Reliance.”

The final treatment of the contrast between the shrunken world of Swedenborg and the expansive world of Nature comes in the Romantic organic image of “ethereal seed” that the youth is to plant in others (l. 45). But he will not tyrannize over them as Swedenborg does over Reed. The seed will grow in their minds according to an “inherent principle,” and the new hopes and grand desires will be theirs alone.

## VI

“S.R.” is an admirable compendium of Emerson's central ideas in his most interesting period. It remains now to identify the “noblest youth” and to assign a year of composition, both conjecturally; the questions are related, and the conjectural year of composition may, in turn, depend upon provocation offered to Emerson by Reed.

<sup>81</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1820, 4 vols.), III, 284.

<sup>82</sup> See *ETE*, I, 233, 293, 350, 374-375, et passim.

Reed's review of "The American Scholar" in the *New Jerusalem Magazine* for October 1837 may be the first instance of provocation. Reed took exception to Emerson's remark that Swedenborg had "endeavored to engraft a purely philosophical Ethics on the popular Christianity of his time." He also took exception to Emerson's regarding Swedenborg as a literary man:

It is most true, that Swedenborg's "literary value" has never yet been rightly estimated; and indeed it may well be doubted whether it ever will be, by those who look upon him, merely as a literary man. They may extol his imagination, and his precision and accuracy. But those can have but a poor idea, even of his literary character, who have not studied his writings too well to speak of his having attempted to engraft any thing "on the popular Christianity of his time." We have no doubt but Mr. Emerson intended to speak respectfully and truly of Swedenborg. But his remarks show that he has read him little; — or rather, to little purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Provocation was most likely intensified by Reed's preface, dated February 28, 1838, to the third edition of *Growth of the Mind*, which appeared on May 1:

From these causes it is not to be expected that the truths of the spiritual sense of the Scripture, which the Lord has now revealed, will find a very ready reception. *Transcendentalism* will rather be caressed. This is the product of man's own brain; and when the human mind has been compelled to relax its grasp on sensualism, and the philosophy based on the senses, it may be expected first to take refuge here. . . . So it may be a step forwards from *sensualism* to *transcendentalism*. It may be a necessary step in the progress of the human mind. But they still lie near each other — almost in contact. . . . *Transcendentalism* is the parasite of *sensualism*; and when it shall have done its work, it will be found to be itself a worm, and the offspring of a worm.<sup>34</sup>

If these two publications represent external provocation, Emerson had, in the spring and summer of 1838, internal provocation to be impatient, generally, with the theological and clerical, for he was preparing his "Divinity School Address." His journals for this period are abundantly strewn with doubting, captious, and bitter remarks on the subject. Thus, on June 23 Emerson wrote that he hated "goodness that preaches." "Goodies," he continued, "make us very bad. We should, if the race should increase, be scarce restrained from calling for

<sup>33</sup> *New Jerusalem Magazine*, II (October, 1837), 72. This review is on pp. 67-72.

<sup>34</sup> *Growth of the Mind* (Boston, 1838), pp. vi-vii. The *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Tuesday, May 1, 1838, p. 3, announced publication on that date.



bowl & dagger. We will almost sin to spite them."<sup>85</sup> The impatience extended to the theological position of Sampson Reed, and the journal passage immediately preceding the one of June 23 just quoted is crucial to our problem:

I should like to get at S.R. very well, but entrenched as he is *in another man's mind*, it is not easy. You feel as if you conversed with a spy. He has you at advantages. He is not convertible. The frank & noble responses of a brother man I shall not hear from him. I cannot hope to shake, to convert him. A fine powerful imaginative soul that has thus bound itself hand & foot to serve another, is all the more intractable. And you have not the satisfaction of a good deliverance yourself (from the m) because of the malign influences of this immense arrogance & subtle bigotry of his church.<sup>86</sup>

Certainly, as Cameron has concluded,<sup>87</sup> the evidence points to a rift in 1838, and it is difficult to dismiss the conjecture that "S.R." was written during that summer, possibly about the time of the passage just quoted. If so, another conjecture follows — that the "noblest youth" was Henry David Thoreau, whom Emerson, fourteen years senior, was beginning to know during the fall of 1837. During the late winter and spring of 1838 Thoreau was preparing his first lecture, "Society," which he delivered before the Concord Lyceum on April 11.<sup>88</sup> Full of his subject, he must have unburdened himself to a sympathetic listener, who recorded his impressions of the young man in his journal. "I delight much in my young friend," wrote Emerson on February 17, "who seems to have as free & erect a mind as any I have ever met." And again on February 17, "My good Henry Thoreau made this else solitary afternoon sunny with his simplicity & clear perception. How comic is simplicity in this doubledealing quacking world. Every thing that boy says makes merry with society though nothing can be graver than his meaning." Finally, on March 6, "my young Henry T." is "spiced throughout with rebellion."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Quoted from p. 41, MS Journal D (Houghton 36) by permission of William H. Bond, Librarian of the Houghton Library and Trustee of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association. See Conrad Wright, "Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address," *Harvard Theological Review*, XLIX (January, 1956), 19-43.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted from p. 41, MS Journal D, by permission.

<sup>87</sup> *ETE*, I, 293-294.

<sup>88</sup> Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York, 1966), pp. 61, 72. See Thoreau's *Journal* (Boston, 1906) I, 36-40.

<sup>89</sup> *JMN*, V, 452, 453, 460.

More important, however, than either the conjectural identity of the "noblest youth" or the conjectural year of composition is what the poem reveals about Emerson himself. Emerson's great gift was to be "lowly faithful" to the God within and to a suprapersonal ideal. "Reverence man," he said in 1832, "& not Plato & Caesar. Wherever there is sense, reflexion, courage [,] admit it to the same honour — embrace it, — quote it from a truckman as quick as from Webster."<sup>40</sup> He sought integrity of character and expression with an indifference to adventitious circumstances that could only be foolishness in his day or ours. That risk he was, apparently, willing to take. We may leave Carlyle, one of his discoveries, out of our reckoning here; but Emerson's discoveries of young Americans are of first importance in the record of our national intellectual life, and invariably they were literary and social outsiders. Whitman was a journalist and carpenter from Brooklyn. Thoreau was a Jack-of-all-trades. Reed was a clerk in a drugstore and a member of a queer, foreign sect.

The poem, with its expression of disillusionment and of faith, records a victory of the spirit that, with characteristic self-effacement, Emerson would not have attributed to himself. He prized the ethereal seed in others.

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<sup>40</sup> *JMN*, IV, 38.