Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Poet”

While now best known as a philosopher, essayist, and lecturer, Emerson, at different times in his career, avowed that he saw himself first and foremost as a poet. First appearing in his collection Essays: Second Series (1844), “The Poet” marks Emerson’s most sustained attempt at defining the vocation of the poet and his central importance within Emerson’s broader philosophical thought. Like all of Emerson’s essays, “The Poet” is difficult to summarize as it moves from point to point, working more through suggestiveness and the reworking of similar ideas in slightly different formulations rather than through sustained argument. Certain chief ideas stand out, however, echoing Emerson’s comments throughout his career on the role of art in human life—the celebration of intuition and inspiration over learning and technique; the connections among the material universe of nature, the individual mind, and the divine, universal, spiritual truth; and a tension between an egalitarian emphasis on the capacity of every human to access this truth and his exaltation of the few who most fully provoke or lead the rest to see the truth.

One of Emerson’s most famous phrases appears early in “The Poet,” placing him squarely within Romanticism’s emphasis on organic, as opposed to imposed, form: “For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem,--a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.” While most of Emerson’s poetry was fairly conventional in its form, in terms of meter and rhyme, stanzaic construction, etc., he emphasizes the form should follow from the inspiration, the feeling, or thought that creates the poem and gives it life. Analogizing the poem to a living entity, the form, like the body of an animal or plant, should grow out of its inner being, should be an extension and expression of its spiritual life. A true poem, in this way, is a unique expression, a living object, as opposed to merely technically brilliant writing (“a music-box of delicate tunes and rhythms” through all of which we hear “the ground-tone of conventional life”). It was what he saw as the emptiness of such writing that led Emerson to dismiss Poe as “the jingle-man.”

In opposition to Poe’s focus on poetic design, Emerson emphasizes intuition. Repeatedly, in “The Poet,” Emerson suggests that the poet does little at all, except to allow “the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him.” It is through “abandonment to the nature of things” that the poet frees himself from his narrow individual view of the world and his thinking begins to “take its direction from celestial life.” In this way, “Imagination” is less creative in itself than merely a “very high sort of seeing . . . by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucid to others.” The poet, in this way, takes on the role of the prophet or the minister, bringing a message of the divinity of nature and of humankind to his listeners.

As such, Emerson elevates the poet to a supreme position within society. He is “representative,” meaning he “stands among partial men for the complete man.” While most men (Emerson elaborates this idea more fully in the opening
of “The American Scholar”) only develop a limited part of their complete humanity, a humanity rooted in its divine nature, the poet can speak for the fullness of human existence. Thus, “he is a sovereign, and stands on the center,” reminding all of humankind that the material world has a “supersensuous utility,” namely that things do not exist in and for themselves but represent a higher and divine truth. Because poets break through our normal way of seeing the world, Emerson twice refers to them as “liberating gods.” In particular, poets help the individual “to escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of that jail-yard of individual relations in which he is enclosed.” By “stimulating” us to imagine the world in new ways, poets free us from our old thought. Unlike the mystic, then, who “nails a symbol to one sense,” the poet must always keep in mind that “all symbols are fluxional,” a flux that mirrors the development of nature, the movement of the mind, and the organization of the universe.

These various definitions and characterizations of the poet almost immediately come into apparent contradiction. Each new poem must have a life of its own, must bring to life a new truth, yet “poetry was all written before time was.” The poet is nothing but a vessel for the divine spirit to speak through, yet he becomes a god himself. The poet stands alone, above all of humanity, and thus “the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology,” yet “every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature.” These tensions or contradictions are central to Emerson’s philosophy. The poet—and every individual—gives expression to an experience never before known, yet the deepest underlying truth of that experience exceeds any individual existence and reflects the laws at the core of the universe. Poetry must thus reflect both those universal laws even as giving expression to their particular manifestation in an individual life. When we truly live according to our innermost selves, we, in fact, transcend the self, for we tap into a divine, universal spirit that pervades all of creation. Even in our less conscious moments, our existence reflects that truth, the truth at the core of what Emerson calls poetry. Emerson’s understanding of the “Universe” as “the externization of the soul” thus leads him to identifying the poet’s chief task as making that relationship real to us. At the same time, however, he contends that we already recognize that relationship, through our commitment to the spirit of things in our employment and our “attachment . . . to the use of emblems:” “The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics” through their recognition of a spiritual truth and meaning behind material form.

Emerson extends poetry, in this way, to almost any form of creative thought or expression that potentially “re-attaches things to nature and the Whole” and thus contends that poetry is “the true science,” for the poet “does not stop at [material] facts, but employs them as signs.” Emerson’s poetics is often characterized, due to statements such as these, as simply a type of Neoplatonic idealism. Poetry—and the material world in general—is only useful and important to the extent it can give us evidence of, or suggest, the spiritual reality lying behind and beyond the physical world: “nations, times, systems, enter and disappear, like threads in tapestry of large figure and many colors.” While this sort of idealism represents a strong element of Emerson’s thought, he extends
almost equal attention to the material manifestation of those spiritual truths—and the importance of attending to the diversity of those manifestations—as well as to the material effects of the spiritual renovation enabled by poetry. This focus on the specific conditions of the physical world undergirds his famous call towards the end of the essay for a distinctly American poet. The problem, as Emerson diagnoses it, is that “We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to live, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstances.” While the true poet will lead us beyond the everyday and past merely contemporary concerns and ways of thinking, he can only do so by engaging with the world as it exists in the here and now. The American poet has a great task at hand, for “Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boasts and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung.” In this passage, often taken as inspiring Walt Whitman’s poetic vision of the U. S., Emerson grounds American poetry in the material conditions of the nation—its economy, its politics, its demographics, and geography—even as he continues to view poetry as bespeaking “the path of the creator to his work,” a path “ideal and eternal.” This tension—between the universal and eternal and its necessary material manifestation as the only route to experiencing or knowing the ideal—lies at the heart of Emerson’s understanding of poetry and his philosophy in general and would be a framework his followers and critics would struggle with for years to come.