

Susan L. Dunston. *Emerson and Environmental Ethics*. Lexington Books 2018. 152 pp. \$90.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781498552967).

Susan Dunston's brief volume is a welcome addition to the philosophical literature on the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Far from merely a gloss on Emerson's influence on environmental ethics, the book offers an original reading of Emerson that explores his philosophy of nature, and points up his ongoing relevance to a surprisingly wide range of matters in environmental ethics. Dunston draws on an outstanding command of Emerson's *oeuvre* to offer a picture of Emerson as a philosopher who 'yokes philosophical thinking to practical action: philosophy is as the philosopher is and does' (xv). In her hands Emerson emerges as a philosopher of life and action whose 'original relation to the universe' allows him to anticipate aspects of contemporary concerns and themes in environmental philosophy and initiate a tradition of environmental philosophy and activism.

Chapter 1, 'Emerson and Environmental Literacy,' looks at Emerson's understanding of the human relationship to nature through the lens of 'environmental literacy.' Building on the idea of 'original relation' from Emerson's early work, *Nature*, Dunston develops what she calls Emerson's 'nature literacy,' an epistemic and spiritual intimacy with nature that Emerson consistently explores through frequent use of the metaphor of nature as a book and the trope of reading and writing nature. This chapter also clarifies Emerson's principal influences, as well as his departures from English romanticism and Asian philosophy.

In the second chapter, 'Emerson Valuing Nature,' Dunston takes up the ethical and aesthetic dimension revealed in the intimacy of an 'original relation' to nature. Rather than offering up a straightforward 'romantic' reading of Emerson, she suggests that 'it is much more interesting, warranted, and useful today to read in Emerson the unfolding of romanticism as a philosophical schema relevant to several contemporary philosophical veins and vital to questions of environmental ethics' (18). Indeed, she helpfully distinguishes Emerson from the European romantic tradition, arguing that Emerson's version of romantic nature philosophy remains relevant today on account of his sensitivity not only to nature as 'a source and standard of truth, beauty, and ethics' (17), but especially due to his emphasis on change, movement, and unpredictability he discovered in nature. 'He knew that inheritance [European romanticism] well and bore some traits forward, but with a primary allegiance to life systems and evolution rather than to the foundational political and artistic revolution that preoccupied much of European romanticism' (18). According to Dunston, what accounts for much of Emerson's continuing relevance, especially for environmental ethics, is that 'he studied and abided the processes of evolution and amelioration, and [thus] his approach to the value of truth, beauty, and morality shares significant ground with contemporary understanding of dynamic, evolving and living systems' (19). Dunston ties this conception of nature to Emerson's understanding of moral value and the moral life. She finds a theory of value in Emerson's work whereby nature is a source for moral values that are created through the ways of life and practices of individuals, being a lover of nature, and a 'reader' or 'writer' of nature, which Dunston helpfully unites under the notion of 'environmental literacy.'

'Emerson and Contemporary Environmentalism,' chapter 3, examines Emerson's anticipation of ecofeminism and systems thinking, as well as his affinity with indigenous environmental philosophy. Reading Emerson as a precursor to and inspiration for ecofeminism, and as anticipating foundational principles of systems thinking, Dunston also makes a case for his impact on environ-

mentalism through his direct influence on nineteenth and twentieth century nature writing. This chapter also points to the striking similarities, as well as significant differences, between Emerson's thought and Indigenous environmental philosophy. Dunston is careful to note that the similarities are not through any direct influence on Emerson, and that he 'came to insights similar to those in Indigenous philosophies primarily through his own experience of his environs and, secondarily, as a thoughtful critic (and beneficiary and sometimes admirer) of science and industrial developments of his era as well as other philosophical traditions' (54). Still, Dunston makes an excellent case for her pursuit of a constructive engagement between Emerson and Indigenous environmental philosophy—that 'the confluence to be found between Emerson and Indigenous philosophy in America today ... offers an opening for discussion *now* rather than represents a deep and extensive conversation between the two' (54).

Taking up Emerson's many references to gardens and the wilderness, in chapter 5, 'The Garden and the Wilderness,' the author argues that Emerson offers an alternative to the antagonistic relationship that characterizes much of the American attitudes toward these two ideas. Emerson, according to Dunston, undermines this strict dichotomy, offering a holistic synthesis, an 'environmental ethic ... that blossoms in the transitions and exchanges between garden and wilderness' (74). The highlight of the chapter is a very instructive comparison and contrast with Aldo Leopold's 'land ethic.' According to Dunston, Emerson was a precursor to Leopold, offering solutions to problems Leopold faced before they arose in the wider culture of America. 'Had Emerson's views become the prevailing social, economic, and political practice,' Dunston avers, 'Leopold might not have needed to urge a land ethic to guide us in co-creating the environment.... We might have incorporated to a much greater extent aesthetic and ethical values into our agriculture, architecture, and technology, into our own homes and gardens and original relations to our environs' (87).

The influence of Asian philosophy on Emerson's thought, and the relevance of this influence to his understanding of the human relation to the environment, is the focus of the concluding chapter, 'Emerson and *Ahimsa*.' The notion of *Ahimsa*, the Sanskrit term meaning 'nonharm,' is rooted in an ontological monism that Emerson shares with Hinduism and Buddhism. Dunston contends that a similar moral principle is implied in Emerson's nature philosophy, was inspired by his deep reading and absorption of Asian philosophy, and is similarly rooted in the conviction that, in some sense, all is one.

Central to chapter five is Dunston's excellent and clear account of ontological monism in Emerson and Hindu sacred scriptures. She also explores how Emerson's reading of Asian philosophy influenced his thinking about place and language. This chapter is an important addition to the literature on Emerson and Asian philosophy for the way it unpacks important aspects of the Asian influence on Emerson's moral philosophy and details the relevance of this influence for his nature philosophy.

At different points in the book, Dunston offers profound insight into Emerson's influence as well as his commonalities with a wide range of thinkers, including Allan Watts, D.T. Suzuki, Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and others. More purely literary figures, such as Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard, at times play almost as large a role as philosophers do in Dunston's account. She manages, however, to take Emerson seriously as a philosopher, consistently demonstrating that his primary importance for environmental ethics lies in his characteristic weaving of philosophy into life. Dunston accurately characterizes Emerson's philosophy as 'sensuous, experiential, and reformist,' and as fundamentally a practice that 'is attentive, relational, empathetic, and aesthetically sensitive' (xv). This is reflected throughout the book in the way that she eloquently and

convincingly interprets Emerson's 'original relation to the universe' in terms of his intimacy with nature.

Dunston has written an important book to add to our libraries on Emerson. Her characterization of the nature of Emerson's philosophy, and what it means to count Emerson as a philosopher, is perhaps one of the book's most original contributions, and her application of this conception of Emerson's philosophy to a range of matters of environmental concern helps us better understand how to read Emerson. *Emerson and Environmental Philosophy* will be of interest to anyone working with Emerson as a philosopher. For anyone who teaches environmental ethics the book will be an inspiration to find room for Emerson on their syllabus, and many outside academic philosophy have much to gain from this close treatment of Emerson, ethics and nature. There's something in this book that will resonate with all who count themselves lovers of nature.

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