



Postmodern Emerson: How the Non-Duped Can Not Err

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Abstract:

*A postmodern problem we all face today is the Scylla and Charybdis of being duped—by metanarratives, ideology, capitalist ruses—and becoming simply cynical about all values. I see tools for finding a way out of this dilemma first in Emerson, especially his essay *Nature*, and then, second, in Žižek’s analysis of how the non-duped can not err.*

Keywords: *Postmodernism, Hermeneutics of Suspicion, (Ralph Waldo) Emerson, (Slavoj) Žižek*

The earliest association of Emerson with postmodernism that I know of is by Cornell West in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989). West does not directly say, “Emerson is a postmodernist,” but he does describe the time of his writing as “our postmodern moment” and American pragmatism as a useful response to it. As he says, “The distinctive appeal of American pragmatism in our postmodern moment is its unashamedly moral emphasis and its unequivocally ameliorative impulse. In this world-weary period of cynicisms, nihilisms, terrorisms, and possible extermination, there is a longing for norms and values that can make a difference....”¹ What must be added to this is that West finds the origins of American pragmatism in the writings of Emerson: “The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy—from Emerson to Rorty—results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism....”² West describes Emerson as a cultural critic who “devised and deployed a vast array of rhetorical strategies in order to exert intellectual and moral leadership over a significant segment of the educated classes of his day.” Furthermore, West says, that “We can no longer afford or justify confining

¹ Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 1989), 4..

² *Ibid.*, 5.

Emerson to the American terrain. He belongs to that highbrow cast of North Atlantic cultural critics who set the agenda and terms for understanding the modern world.”³

I take West here to be referring, in his reference to “that highbrow cast of North Atlantic cultural critics,” to the great hermeneuts of suspicion identified by Paul Ricoeur: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud⁴ (West directly identifies Nietzsche and Marx, but leaves out Freud). I understand these great hermeneuts of suspicion to be largely responsible for, along with economic, technological, and political developments, the emergence of postmodernism. There have been many things written about postmodernism, but for my purposes Jean François Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* works quite well: “I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” Lyotard, in the very next sentence, makes a very important point vis à vis the remark I make above that it is the hermeneuts of suspicion as well as economic, technological, and political developments that gave rise to postmodernism: “This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”⁵ I take this to be a statement that ideas matter, a statement I agree with, although my own account will problematize that statement.

Postmodernism brings with it some real progress with respect to many issues of justice. Postmodernism has not eliminated sexism and racism and nationalism and classism and the various phobias of Others, but it has made some headway on all these fronts and made it at least socially awkward and largely unappealing to openly avow the traditional Western viewpoints, owned by the hegemonic, dominate class (white men), in all of these areas. It has done this, in part, by problematizing our insider/outsider group identities. The downside of postmodernism is the way it problematizes our insider/outsider group identities. Our identities are constructed out of our group identifications. If our group identifications get problematized, our identities become destabilized. The one identity we are politically and socially allowed without, or with less, censure is our identity as consumers. We become what we buy. Shopping has become less about acquiring necessities to live, than about constructing an image of ourselves.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

⁵ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiv.

The question, then, is, is this a desirable, a workable, a sustainable source for identity. Postmodernism, postmodern theory, with its strong roots in Marxist theory, will say that it is not. This, too, is in Emerson.

Emerson, however, has some non-Marxist strategies for repairing our damaged sense of our self and for founding a new sense of self. One of the primary themes of all of Emerson's writings is the idea of developing an authentic, individual self. The ultimate foundation for the self for Emerson is not social or societal, which, for us, is late stage capitalism, but nature. Emerson is a philosopher of nature. His basic strategy is that if we can figure out how nature works we can understand how we should work in nature. This is a paradoxical concern since we are born into this world and are, each of us, a part of nature, we each have our own natures, so what is there to study or to understand? And yet, we feel ourselves incomplete. We feel the absence of some satisfaction that seems to us promised yet unrealized. Emerson, as a philosopher of nature, is a philosopher of that promise and how it might be realized. Capitalism offers itself as the promise and as the possibility of its realization, but has failed to deliver on that promise. Emerson does not critique capitalism, per se, as Marx does. What Emerson critiques is the idea that capitalism is the promise, or the possibility of its realization. Emerson critiques the idea that capitalism will provide us with the materials we need for constructing an authentic self.

Our postmodern dilemma is that we feel lost, we do not know who we are, the old metanarratives that told us who we are have more or less collapsed and we find nothing to replace them to tell us who we are. How are we to find a way to know who we are, who we can be, how we can go forward? In the essay *Nature* Emerson says, "Every man's [sic] condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put."⁶ Emerson suggests that this problem is not as new as it may seem. Identity, to understand who one is, has always been a problem for people. Metanarratives or no metanarratives, each person's uniqueness poses the question of who one is to be that no metanarrative can really answer. What Emerson sees is that the solution to this problem is contained in the very terms that pose the problem. The problem arises from our "condition." Our condition is comprised of who we are, by nature, and where we find ourselves, in nature. Our lost-ness to ourselves can be described in terms of a sense of disharmony between who we feel we are, by nature, and the nature, the condition, we find ourselves in. It is an ancient Stoic principle

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 7.

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that the way to happiness is to find, to recover, the harmony between our inner nature and outer nature.

Here is a beautiful quotation from Emerson's *Nature* that describes the problem and the solution:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look to nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand, as perception.

It is a beautiful formulation of postmodern despair, that "the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps." The diagnosis is also very postmodern: "man is disunited with himself." The solution is at once explicit and hieroglyphic: satisfy "the demands of the spirit," and, furthermore, for the spirit, "love is as much its demand as perception." What this means can only be said on the other side of an analysis of the concept of the duped and the non-duped, but I will make just one remark in passing. Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* is dealing with similar postmodern problems. He is arguing for a philosophy without essences, which is a postmodern philosophy. He sees a similar problem of feeling lost and without reference points to guide us. His language in describing what is needed echoes Emerson's version. Wittgenstein says, "One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need."⁷ Wittgenstein does not say what the fixed point of our real need is, but I take it is a part of our condition in hieroglyphic.

Emerson did not appear to be particularly postmodern when he was writing his essays and giving his lectures, but, retrospectively, reading him through a postmodern lens, he appears radically postmodern, more postmodern than many postmodernists. Emerson, in his way, competes with the great hermeneuts of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the classic sources of postmodernism. Emerson is, in some ways, as critical of capitalism as Marx, as religiously heretical as Nietzsche, and has a

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §108.

pervasive subtext that is as sexual as Freud. For all that, Emerson is not doing a hermeneutics of suspicion. He is doing a hermeneutics of joy.

Emerson wears a guise of nineteenth century decorum and Victorian-esque moral sobriety, but what he is really engaged in is ecstasy, what the postmoderns call *jouissance*. Further, he claims his right to it, without apology or guilt. He claims this right not just for himself but for everyone. It is the joy of being alive, of being human, of having a mind, of bearing witness to the world for whatever brief time, for a moment, for a life. Against this joy Oedipal urges, class struggle, religious conformity or non-conformity pale. They are not irrelevant, and Emerson will energetically address these issues, but in moments of ecstasy, these issues, and their attendant outrage, confusion, complaint, slip from consciousness. They are outshined by what is experientially possible, by what one actually experiences in such moments of joy.

For Emerson, there are complaints that serve justice, but the real gift to another is not simply justice, though that must be declared, but joy. One does not give this gift as an object. It is already in all of us as a potential in every moment. We have it by nature. One gives it by making space for another to experience his or her own joy. The space that Emerson gives he calls an "essay." In an essay, he models how joy works. It emerges from his thinking, which is nature working in him. When he is thinking, as he says in *Self-Reliance*, "all I know is reception." He is receiving and passing on what he receives, like the objects in a gift economy as opposed to capital in capitalism. And the form of his passing his gift on is as provocation. He provokes via obscurity. As one of his best friends described what it was like to listen to Emerson lecture, he said it was like being immersed in "a golden fog." As William James says of Emerson in his "Address at the Emerson Centenary in Concord", "...this is Emerson's revelation: The point of any pen can be an epitome of reality..." What I understand James to be saying is that Emerson's essays are performative. He is not writing about nature, he is enacting nature through his pen. In the process of his performing thinking he invites us to think along with him. Performative writing is very postmodern and one of the "vast array of rhetorical strategies" to which West refers.

Emerson is criticized for not being more politically active, for not being more demonstrative, for example, in his opposition to the institution of slavery. It is a serious criticism, yet from Emerson we will not get a Stalin or a Chairman Mao, we will not get dogmatic atheists and proliferating phallic symbols. What we get are pathways to joy that anyone can follow if they only learn how to follow the signs that Emerson leaves to mark the way. Sometimes it is time for political activism, to make changes in the

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world, and sometimes it is time to think, to reflect, to receive and change oneself rather than to work at changing other people. That seems to be the message of perhaps the greatest book on politics every written, Plato's *Republic*, where in Book IV Socrates defines justice in just these terms, "justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (*Republic*, 433a). Emerson was much more an advocate of the latter activity than the former. That can be read as a sign of his privilege, or that also can be read as his postmodernism, a prescription that is not about him but is about us.

In the 1990 article "How the Non-Duped Err" Slavoj Žižek writes the word "duped" precisely once. Here is what he says, "the only way not to be deceived is to maintain a distance toward the symbolic order, i.e. to assume a psychotic position—a psychotic is precisely a subject who is not duped by the symbolic order." This is not much to go on for unpacking the sense of the phrase, which Žižek takes from Lacan, that "the non-duped err." What follows is my attempt at a more complete and complex unpacking. The claim that the non-duped err suggests three levels of duped-dom: the duped, the non-duped who err, and the non-duped who do not err. At first glance, this would seem to identify an increasing order of desirability. The worst is to be duped, the best to be the non-duped who do not err, but that is not quite right. The worst is actually to be the non-duped who err.

The duped are those who do not get ideology. They may have gone to college, but they did not take any philosophy classes. When they shop they just shop, when they love they just love, when they speak they mean what they say, they think they are in control of what they choose to do. The non-duped are those who have read the great hermeneuts of suspicion, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud. They know that it is all ideology. They know that religion is really just will to power and that God is dead, that capitalism is really just the triumph of the oligarchs, and that love is really Oedipal or Electral, and that there is no sexual relationship. They get that nothing is as it appears to be, or, more specifically, as it appears to be to the duped. So, when they shop they are not really shopping, they are participating in the circulation of capital that ensures the triumph of the rich over the poor. When they love they know that the person they love is really just a projection of an infantile desire to have sex with their parent. When they speak they do not really mean what they say except ironically. They see how nobody really chooses what they are doing but are merely manifesting the behaviors dictated by the big Other. They get it, so how do they err?

They err because they think that because they can see the ideology at work that they are not subject to the ideology. They think that the poor dupes are stuck in the ideology and that they, the non-duped, are not, but they are. This is what Žižek says, now from his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*,

we effectively *become* something by pretending that we *already are* that. To grasp the dialectic of this movement, we have to take into account the crucial fact that the “outside” is never simply a “mask” we wear in public but is rather the symbolic order itself. By “pretending to be something,” by “acting as if we were something,” we assume a certain place in the inter-subjective symbolic network, and it is this external place that defines our true position. If we remain convinced, deep within ourselves, that “we are not really that,” if we preserve an intimate distance toward “the social role we play,” we double deceive ourselves. The final deception is that social appearance is deceitful, for in the social-symbolic reality things ultimately *are* precisely what they *pretend* to be.⁸

The double deception that the non-duped who err suffer from is that they think they are not (really) what the symbolic network says they are (deception one), and, in thinking that, that they have achieved some kind of power or freedom, but they have not (deception two). The consequence is that they are alienated from the symbolic network, and also from themselves. The duped simply think they ARE what they think they are, they think they are the role that they play in the symbolic network, a teacher, a sales-person, a police person, a business person, and that is, in fact, what they have become.

If they (we) really are what they (we) have become, then are they (we) really duped at all? If they are duped, is there a way to be non-duped but also not to err? The answers to these two questions are, first, yes, they are duped and that is bad, although not as bad as being non-duped and erring, and, second, yes, there is a way to be non-duped and not err. The duped are still duped because they do not know what they do not know about what they do not know and that leads to a kind of seriousness. This seriousness is bad not just because it is seriousness, but because it prevents

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 74.

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them from every getting what they really want, happiness., although, in truth, they will be much closer to happiness than the non-duped who err are.

What about the final alternative, how can one become one who is non-duped but does not err? This is how Žižek describes the relation between the non-duped who err and the non-duped who do not err *vis a vis* the interpretation of the films of Hitchcock:

...it should be clear how one should answer those who reproach Hitchcockian *aficionados* with the ‘divinization’ of their interpretive object—with the elevation of Hitchcock into a God-like demiurge who masters even the smallest details of his work: such an attitude is simply a sign of transferential relation—[*sujet suppose savoir*]—and is it necessary to add that there is more truth in it, that it is theoretically far more productive, than the attitude of those who lay stress on Hitchcock’s fallibility, inconsistencies, etc.? In short, here, more than ever, the Lacanian motto *les non-dupes errant* is in force: the only way to produce something real in theory is to pursue the transferential fiction to the end.⁹

The critics who critique Hitchcock, who point out his inconsistencies, are the critics who see through the transferential relation that catches up the (apparent) dupes, and so are not duped by it, but, they err. They are doubly deceived. They have nothing but their own non-dupedness, which really is nothing. They are not right about Hitchcock and they are not right about the *aficionados* who interpret Hitchcock. The *aficionados* are the non-duped who do not err. They pursue the transferential relation to the end. The non-duped who do not err look to the non-duped who err like the duped, but they are not. The duped are the people who think that Hitchcock just makes entertaining films, thrillers and romances. There is no transferential relation for the duped and so the films are just mild entertainments, nothing more. For the non-duped who do not err, the films contain endless mysteries that generate proliferating interpretations. The place of passionate enjoyment is precisely the place where people go all the way with the transferential relation. It is their MacGuffin. The MacGuffin, as everyone knows (who is not a dupe), is what drives the plot of every Hitchcock film, but has no actual importance by

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Wanted to Know about Lacan... But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (New York: Verso, 1992), 10.

the end of the film: government secrets, who is George Kaplan, what happened to Mrs. Thorwald. It is an empty signifier that can take on any meaning. It is, in its essence, just our response of interest in the world. As Hans Blumenberg says, “Curiosity is the disturbance of boredom. The MacGuffin is its epiphany.”¹⁰

Let me take a slightly different approach to the question of how the non-duped can not err. I will use a different vocabulary, it is still the vocabulary of Lacan and Žižek, but it is not about being duped or erring but about desire versus drive and how these inflect our happiness. Desire is associated with hysteria and drive with perversion: “The opposition here is between perversion and hysteria: if desire ‘as such’ is hysterical, drive ‘as such’ is perverse.”¹¹ What characterizes desire is the experience of, as Žižek says, *ce n’est pas ça*, ‘that’s not it.’ Drive, on the other hand does find satisfaction, but in something that one does not desire, in something, as it were, that is unpleasant. The word that Žižek and the Lacanians use for pleasure is *jouissance*. This is one way that Žižek describes the relation of desire and drive: “desire reflexively desires its own unsatisfaction, the postponement of the encounter with *jouissance*—that is, the basic formula of the reflexivity of desire is to turn the impossibility of satisfying desire into the desire for non-satisfaction; drive, on the contrary, finds satisfaction in (i.e. *besmirches* with the stain of satisfaction) the very movement destined to ‘repress’ satisfaction.”¹²

Here is another formulation of the relation of desire and drive:

“Desire is defined by this *ce n’est pas ça*: that is, its most elementary and ultimate aim is to sustain itself as desire, in its state on non-satisfaction. Drive, on the other hand, stands for the paradoxical possibility that the subject, forever prevented from achieving his Goal (and thus fully satisfying his desire), can nevertheless find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object, of circulating around it: the gap constitutive of desire is thus closed, the self-enclosed loop of a circular repetitive movement replaces infinite striving. In this precise sense, drive equals *jouissance*, since *jouissance* is, at its most elementary, ‘pleasure in pain’, that is, a perverted pleasure

¹⁰ Hans Blumenberg, “Being—A MacGuffin: How to Preserve the Desire to Think.” *Salmagundi*, No. 90-91, (Spring-Summer 1991), 193.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 351.

¹² *Ibid.*, 351-2.

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provided by the very painful experience of repeatedly missing one's goal."¹³

Desire is created in us by the big Other, which is to say, ideology. We love to shop because we are programmed by the ideology of capitalism to love shopping. We shop for the object of our desire. When we have found something, we buy it, and by the time we get home with the object we recognize that *ce n'est pas ça*, that's not it. Drive, on the other hand, is a behavior that we do not desire, but, in doing it, we find real satisfaction. Drives make us socially successful. People love it when they see people chasing their desires. Drives tend toward socially unacceptable behavior. Drinking and drugs are drive behaviors. I see the Dude in *The Big Lebowski* as one who disdains desire and lives for drive. He is a dropout from society and the only real happy person in the movie. He knows *jouissance*. But walking through the woods is also drive behavior—socially useless, in itself, pointless, yet profoundly satisfying: never going anywhere, endlessly repeatable, pure *jouissance*.

The duped pursue their desires. The non-duped who err renounce their desire because they recognize that their desires are ideologically constructed and not really *their* desires. The non-duped who do not err embrace their desire in the form of a drive, that is, they fully embrace the transferential relation to the end. They never get there. They endlessly circulate around some unreachable core, but, in the very circulating activity, they find a kind of joy, *jouissance*. The duped, in pursuing their desires directly experience social success, but live with a quiet desperation because they experience no *jouissance*. The non-duped who err renounce their desires, but in renouncing their desires they forgo being anything in particular and having nothing but their own bitterness, their own conviction about their non-dupedness, to sustain them. These are the postmodern nihilists.

The non-duped who do not err embrace, with a passion, their desire and go to the end with it. I take Socrates to be the paradigmatic exemplar of the life of drive, the life of the non-duped who does not err: endless repeating the idiotic question “What is x?”, never getting a satisfying answer, and experiencing the process as pure *jouissance*. Emerson, too, is, in my estimation, a non-duped who does not err. His drive is the essay, the attempt to say what nature is, repeated over and over again, always incompletely, always unsuccessfully, and always joyfully. The hieroglyphic

¹³ *Ibid.*, 359-60.

of our condition is the secret source of drive. It is the axis of our real need. To say it is hieroglyphic is to say that it is written in an unfamiliar language, but really, it is our own language, the language of our own nature to be attracted to some activity that is endlessly fascinating, literally, and hence has no end.

This is the idiotic joy, the *jouissance*, of drive at its purest: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.” This is Emerson in his great essay *Nature*, and, I believe, the joy, the *jouissance*, returns to him in the act of writing of his experience in the common. It is a joy unknown to the duped and the non-duped who err alike. It is known only to the non-duped who do not err.

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