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Thurin, Emerson as Priest of Pan: A Study in the Metaphysics of Sex

Eric W. Carlson
University of Connecticut

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ERIK INGVAR THURIN. *EMERSON AS PRIEST OF PAN: A STUDY IN THE METAPHYSICS OF SEX*. LAWRENCE: THE REGENTS PRESS OF KANSAS, 1981. xviii, 292 pp. \$20.00.

This publication is timely, coming as it does during a renewal of interest in Emerson, occasioned in part by the centennial of his death in 1982. That Emerson's struggle with the "metaphysics of sex" was much more than an abstract theoretical question is amply documented by Thurin's analysis of Emerson's friendships with men and women. The ambiguous, dialectical friendship—intellectual and emotional—of Emerson and Margaret Fuller in particular was effectively dramatized by Laurie James and Dr. David Osborne at Bowdoin College last summer. As Thurin notes: "it is impossible to understand Emerson by studying him alone....What is more, much of the excitement of a prolonged involvement with Emerson definitely comes from these literary relationships, the opportunity and need to associate with the great minds with whom he saw himself identifying in love and aspiration." Thurin's earlier involvement culminated in a dissertation at the University of Minnesota (1970), published as *The Universal Autobiography of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lund, 1974), of which the present volume is a reworking but not a replacement.

At the outset, Thurin clarifies his title and purpose: implicit in any theory of love, not merely erotic love, is a theory of man and his place in the universe. As the "priest of Pan," Emerson identifies with the great poet-redeemer-mediator between heaven and earth. He does so in the broad syncretic tradition of hermetic-alembic thought in which the feminine equates with the earth and the masculine with heaven, the ideal. With Emerson, as Thurin illustrates, the bipolaric "marriage" of these opposites typically yields to a monistic assimilation by the Platonic ideal. In addition to the opening and closing chapters, this study falls into four triadic parts of three chapters each. The first triad (chaps. 2, 3, and 4) demonstrates the monistic tendency in Emerson's gender ideology; the second triad (5, 6, 7) deals with his dualistic tendencies and tensions; the third considers his imaginative speculations on human society raised above earthly concerns, sex included; and the fourth represents the monistic heaven within, "internal marriage." The final chapter (14) returns to the question of a possible balance between "Europe and Asia." In his response to "Eastern" mysticism, "Asia" became a symbolic name for the eternal Feminine, the Great Mother, Mother Nature, the epic womb out of which a rebirth would be possible. But then Thurin finds "the insistent suggestion that it is really all the elements together—those of the

sky as well as those of the earth—that beguile him.” This concept of the epic whole, the source of genius and power when man learns to draw upon it, is represented by Father Bacchus and by “an old friend” (Thoreau as Pan), is symbolized by the stars (in contrast to the moon), and is identified with the Over-Soul, the *natura naturans*. In “Fate” (1860), Emerson’s final statement on this matter and a continuation of the earlier “Nature” (1844), the stark conflict is once more posed between the East (fate, matter, circumstance) and the West (freedom, mind, power, progress), with freedom capable of triumphing over fate through the power of intellect. Thurin makes an important distinction here: in “Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity” Emerson meant not fate but the laws of the universe. “Europe and Asia,” the private and the public nature of individual experience, are seen finally in precarious balance, in “double consciousness.”

Eric W. Carlson, *Emeritus*

The University of Connecticut