

# “The Method of ‘Ecstasy’” and Keats’ ‘Ode on Melancholy’<sup>1</sup>

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I

Emerson delivered the “The Method of Nature” first as an oration before the *Society of the Adelpi*, Waterville College, Maine in 1841. It is unspectacular in many aspects, except in its attempts to define the limits, or limitlessness of the forms of Ecstasy. Consider how Emerson lays the foundation for the employment of ecstasy in his essay:

Nature can only be conceived as existing to a universal and not to a particular end, to a universe of ends, and not to one—a work of *ecstasy*, to be represented by a circular movement, as intention might be signified by a straight line of definite length. (4, emphasis in original)

In the first section of the passage quoted above, two ideas force themselves through the structure—first, whether or not the apocalyptic form of the Universe be multitudinous, the origin goes undiscussed—which leads me to evince that there might not have been a beginning to the Universe *per se*, or the beginning of the Universe must have been the same for everyone living or dead, and is too redundant to be questioned again. Secondly, the unilinear and un-beginning universe, under all circumstances, must have pluralities in its manner of deace, which, like Aristotelian teleology, must participate in its unilinear beginning before being *truly* an end. This Emerson calls an ecstasy: not a form in itself, but represented best through “a circular movement”, which answers the first question—ecstasy, or *through* ecstasy, if ecstasy *is*, the dead shall live the beginning, the creation, as the cycle shall come full circle, which further emphasizes that there *is* a beginning of creation, at least empirically. The dilemma appears in the second section of the quote where Emerson mentions “intention”, a curiously difficult word in this context. If “ecstasy” is employment, then selective employment is a possibility, and this is what Emerson means

by “intention”. This furthers the selective employment, the agential pursuit of the empirical epistemology of beginning and end, or rather—the end and beginning, through ecstasy. It opens up the primary question I carpet forth in this essay—if “ecstasy” is represented by a “circular movement”, is ecstasy of geometric value? If I assume it is, is there mathematics, a method to this circle, an idea with a form?

The essay’s “intention” continues to intensify; this time, Emerson’s invests more in his definition of Ecstasy:

In short, the spirit and peculiarity of that impression nature makes on us, is this, that it does not exist to any one or to any number of particular ends, but to numberless and endless benefit; that there is in it no private will, no rebel leaf or limb, but the whole is oppressed by one superincumbent tendency, obeys that redundancy or excess of life which in conscious beings we call *ecstasy*. (5, original italics)

In the first passage quoted above, the “intention” was left open ended—it was free in its volition to remain both private and public, either or even neither. Emerson tightens the cord by asserting there is “no private” will; it perpetuates the idea that ecstasy, or its circular movement from the end to the beginning directs its will centrifugally, which directs, in more ways than one, that the source, the beginning *must* be common, and hence has no need to create a private will, since private and public unify into one, or was one at the time of creation. The reason for its being private although truly being public, according to Emerson, is because

The universal does not attract us until housed in an individual. (5)

I leave it at this for the time being and return to the original quote. In conscious beings, the “superincumbent tendency”- the excess of life, by which is meant life that oppresses through the *memory* of previous life, and life that shall oppress as a result of the labours of the present, and its impressions into the future. Whether it occurs or not is not the question Emerson poses; whether or not the metaphysical pressure of such a realistic possibility has a visible effect or not is Emerson’s query. If it is so, one has Ecstasy. A combination of these two definitions, till now, yields for us this definition: Ecstasy is represented by a circular movement whose thrusts, through its will, are directed outward, such that the conscious mind is receptive to the true metaphysical pressure of lives that oppresses Emerson’s attempt at integration and harmony with his life.

As I see it, there are still blind spots in this definition. Why is ecstasy expressed only in the language of superabundance? Why is the un-ecstatic un-selfconscious of life despite non recognition of other premonitions of similar lives if not same lives? At least for the question of superabundance or excess, the ecstatic state is again brought into light:

The ecstatic state seems to direct a regard to the whole and not to the parts; to the cause and not to the ends; to the tendency, and not to the act. It respects genius and not talent; hope, and not possession: the anticipation of all things by the intellect, and not the history itself; art and not works of art; poetry, and not experiment; virtue, and not duties. (7)

“Ecstasy” functions between antithetical ideas; between binaries, but most importantly, between the genuine and genuinely imitative. The difference between the “tendency” and the “act” is the difference between the spirit of action and the labour of action, the first hegemonizing the second. Hence, ecstasy is an excess of spirit superiorized over excess

labour, perhaps askew when excess spirit leads towards controlled action. This, when defining the conditions of ecstasy, allows one to defer tendency with respect to the act, furthering speculations that the tendency might, in the deferment of action, dissipate. Thus, when Mark Edmundson says, "The effort of the creative mind is perpetually to reimagine its true poverty, its *clinging* creative forms, as the motive for *self-reinvention*" (Bloom ed., 112, emphasis mine), I interpret this as the fleeting, systematically deprecating permanence of ecstasy or the "ecstatic state", preponderating the idea that Ecstasy strikes and shrinks or sinks, thus ensuring the "motive" of "self-reinvention" remains. As Emerson concludes by explaining elaborately,

And because ecstasy is the law and cause of nature, therefore you cannot interpret it in too high and deep a sense. Nature represents the best meaning of the wisest man. Does the sunset landscape seem to you the palace of friendship—those purple skies and lovely waters the amphitheatre dressed and garnished only for the exchange of thought and love of the purest souls? It is that. All other meanings which base men have put on it are conjectural and false. You cannot bathe twice in the same river, said Heraclitus. And I add, a man never sees the same object twice: with his own enlargement the object acquires new aspects. (8)

This is the final answer, or useful non-answer to the ecstatic state, that it cannot be interpreted at all, provided for by the causation of nature, both its beginning and being. Given that the state of ecstasy is outflanked by that of Nature soon after, I shall revert back to the "intention" of ecstasy by answering two questions in the last section of this paper: What is the stable causative teleology of ecstasy? And, to sum up, is it an absolute physiological and psychological succession?

## II

Consider these lines from the first line of Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy':

Nor let the beetle, nor the downy owl  
(be) A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. (Paul Wright ed., 233, 7-10)

"Sorrow's mysteries" should rather not be shared, although one is under no compulsion not to share it. The choice to preclude "A partner" while both constructing and containing mysteries had better not be mutual, which furthers my original thesis that the "superincumbent tendency" in Emerson, the excess duress, had better contribute to the making of an unobjectifiable sorrow slowly transformed into the pluralities of mystery. Else, the true objective of this mystery, upon going to the river of forgetfulness, would hint at the individual's failure in associating with the hypostatic object that the subject should create in the absence of a true object, and in this process continue making it mutually beneficial, risking in the process genuine disbelief, or consider wiping it away from memory, which will not let the mysterious establish itself through the excess at all. Let me sum up my claims thus—the metaphysical excess of ecstasy, when forced upon an intellect, must *not* be dealt with in two ways—first, the excess, in its being mutually exclusive, risks severe dilution, and second—an attempt to eradicate the excess shall, under all circumstances, risk ignorance to the extent of being incapable of identifying with the

excess at all, and the drowning of the "wakeful anguish". As Barbara Herrnstein Smith demonstrates, "do not go to Lethe, the abode of death, for although you might think so, Melancholy does not dwell there." (684). The Kind that dwells in the form of melancholy in Lethe is depressive and diabolic, a negative rehabilitation of the excess from the ecstatic state, and not true melancholic possession.

Coming to the second stanza of Keats's Ode, one finds an intelligent reference to ecstasy, and its inevitable relation to melancholy:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
*Sudden from heaven* like a weeping cloud, (11-12, emphasis mine)

If I were to interpret "sudden from Heaven" from the viewpoint of Ecstasy, or a "superincumbent tendency" properly registered, what Keats refers to as "melancholy fit" can fairly be interpreted as melancholy 'right'. A right entitles the person whose systematic registration of an Ecstatic excess is to "weep" or flood his way into melancholy, although one dilemma remains unsolved: Why is it not a rise, but the consequences of an action verb "fall"? How is it that the Karmic succession from ecstasy to melancholic "right" does not register as a subtilizing, in the sense of elevation through refinement?

I shall return to this question at the end of this paper. As this stanza terminates, one is left with an antithetical foretaste of emotive response:

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. (18-20)

To quote Barbara Smith at length here:

No, if you would know true melancholy, do not go to Lethe, do not search for it (or her) in the common trappings of death, because they will put you on the wrong track. *But*, rather, if you do find yourself sometime in a melancholy mood of otherwise inexplicable origin, hold on to it, intensify it, by contemplating beauty in nature; or, "if your mistress some rich anger shows", ignore the situation as a situation, and concentrate on her beauty. (687, original emphasis)

A critical summary provides us the natural antithesis between natural and melancholic right; anger to be imbued with anger is natural, anger to be replaced and substituted, through melancholy, with beauty, creates possibilities of aesthetic elevation over the generic expression of repressed feelings always headed towards a dead end. Since ecstasy precedes melancholy, and since melancholy provides antithetical synthesis to a generic emotive response, it can be argued that ecstasy is a pre-tense, or pre-tension to the "melancholic fit". This pre-tension, "sudden from Heaven", disintegrates into melancholy, upon its application to human creative response, yields elevating possibilities. The last stanza of Keats's Ode provides the final nemesis of such elevation:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; (21-22)

The idea that a feminine subject dwelling with both an abstract and a real form of Beauty must compulsorily die is derived through the imprisoning of her "soft hand",