

# "Beckoning: The Appeal of Nature in Emerson and Gadamer"

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This essay seeks to bring together the different theoretical and aesthetic concepts concerning nature as found in the work of Emerson and Gadamer through the notion of a governing *relation* between nature and humanity, one that retains its force in our contemporary Anthropocene culture. Beginning with an excursus into Emerson's seminal *Nature* essay (1836) and its depiction of a world of nature that is open both to human building and preservation, this essay contends that there is nevertheless in Emerson the spectral echo of an inaccessible essence of the natural world that is both epistemological and ontological. Deeply skeptical of the technical determinism of his age, Gadamer's hermeneutical explorations into the natural world also rejects the objectification of the nature in favor of an *understanding* of nature that is deeply felt or conceived as an originary relation. Rather than embracing a Romantic longing to return to a lost origin, both Emerson and Gadamer seem to offer ways of thinking and listening to nature within the defaced world of the Anthropocene.

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To *beckon*, a signal without voice, a mute gesture, as if from a spectral figure. With the emergence of the Anthropocene, thinkers from a variety of philosophical and cultural perspectives have often argued that humanity has within it the resources for self-transformation, development, and creative becoming to answer the ineluctable, mute beckoning of nature under siege. At the same time, it is possible to recognize complex reactions to an anticipated Anthropocene from writers in earlier epochs. In their own ways, both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Hans-Georg Gadamer offer prophecies of environmental catastrophe and rejoinders as to how we have come to define our relationship with nature. In this essay, I would like to explore how Emerson

and Gadamer discover renewable models of understanding our contemporary climate crises in the strangely mute beckoning of the natural world.

Deeply influenced by Romantic conceptions of the natural world as a space degraded by emerging industrialism and Enlightenment materialism, Emerson clearly saw humanity's power to shape and be shaped by our unavoidable, spiritually provocative encounters with nature. Although Emerson could not have foreseen entirely the existential threats of our present era, he was not naive about the power that humanity gained, intentionally or otherwise, from a proleptic definition of nature as both an imaginary utopia and a space of unbounded, at times performative violence. Indeed, for Emerson, the natural and human worlds echo each other as symbolic repositories of meaning, instilling within humanity an ability and legitimation of remaking the world in which it finds itself. Emerson is very much interested in defining the virtues needed to encircle human beings and nature within a mutually restorative, rather than destructive, relationship, seeking to draw from this relation the virtues required for improvement and perfectibility and helping those who inhabit his conception of modernity to make a home in a world indelibly marked and bounded by scientific and technological change.

We can see this kind of work taking place clearly throughout Emerson's corpus and yet it is in *Nature*, his long essay published in 1836, that the idealistic symbolic logic of Emerson's approach can be seen most clearly. With typical Emersonian flair, *Nature* opens with a proclamation that situates the reader clearly with a historical horizon while questioning the restraints imposed by it: «Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?»<sup>1</sup>. What are we to understand by the nature of this originary "relation," then, if the modes of writing criticized by Emerson, those that seek meaning in and lauding the past, are not sufficient? What originary relation exists outside this retrospective glance and from

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<sup>1</sup> R. Emerson, *Nature*, p. 7, in R.W. Emerson, *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte. Library of America, New York 1983, pp. 5-50.

whence do we perceive it? What relation exists towards an undefined futurity? Emerson hints at the nature of this relation when, near the end of the essay, he states, «it is essential to a true theory of nature and of man, that it should contain somewhat progressive»<sup>2</sup> and not just retrospective elements. Indeed, the very title of the final chapter, “Prospects,” hints at what a “somewhat progressive” relation may entail: a symbolic overdetermination of *sight*, invoking Emerson’s famous “transparent eyeball” metaphor of divine perception from *Nature*, as a way to envision a new relation with the natural world that resists ossification within a past temporal horizon and determines its own paradigmatic virtues, seeding a sense of futurity that sees itself not with retrospective reflection but with an ideal, natural renewing. The originary, then, is to be found in its capacity for renewal and, indeed, in the very possibility of renewal itself.

The privileging of *sight* in Emerson and, by extension, the heritage of Romantic encounters with nature in Transcendentalism, a heritage that informs American notions of wilderness to this very day, offers indications for how we perceive our relation to the natural world, one echoing from an originary relation. For Emerson, it can be found in concepts associated with *relation*, one to the natural world that informs it with a kind of creative potency. Rodolphe Gasché illuminates this sense of philosophical relation as always already possible:

«(I)n a relation, not only does the subject tend toward the other with all the indicated implications for the subject, but also the *relatum* of the relation lets the subject come into a relation to it. There is no relation, then, without a prior opening of the possibility of being-toward-another by which the subject is allowed to arrive in the place of the other. Without this gift of an opening for a subject to turn toward the other, no relation would ever be able to occur»<sup>3</sup>.

Emerson’s “originary relation” can be understood here, then, within the very essence of its possibility, a kind of beckoning that the relation of subject to other,

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> R. Gasché, *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 9.

humanity to nature, invokes. To see nature as it sees itself, then, *natura naturans*, is to imagine that it also calls to humanity within this act of self-creation, intimating an offer to inherit its powerful, eternal renewing presence. From one perspective, then, Emerson's prospective relation, as we shall see, can be understood as a founding concept in the very environmental degradation we have both inherited and created for ourselves, an endless, self-sustaining future present that is blind to a destructive force that is seen as creative and progressive in a materialistic, exploitative sense. If the natural world, in beckoning to us to participate in its order and unfolding nevertheless allows for our violence and destruction in the realization of some higher purpose guided by humanity, then it also reserves for itself a renewing that is unaffected by us and, indeed, unconcerned with us. The horizon of the Anthropocene is both here and distant.

Drawing the horizon of the Anthropocene, then, becomes a double movement. In the "Introduction" to *Nature*, Emerson provides crucial hints about two terms that inform this sense of our relation to this horizon that appears throughout the essay and his later work: "science" and "Nature." For Emerson, science occupies a mediating role in the relation we have been suggesting, one that both informs our purposes and silences nature in a way that already does not speak to us. «All science has one aim», Emerson states, «namely, to find a theory of nature . . . *Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence.* Its test is that it will explain all phenomena»<sup>4</sup>. Here we find a portrait of science, broadly conceived, unified by a common aim in explanation. According to Emerson's diagnosis, however, the malady of scientific understanding afflicts human agency insofar as it «applies to nature but half its force»<sup>5</sup>. As understood through a Romantic conception of the poet as fallen divinity seeking to redeem himself and his world alongside, for example, the figure of the god-like scientist of Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819), the plausible objections of environmental ethicists towards science as an incomplete understanding of nature begin to emerge. Are not humanity's divine ambitions allied with a scientific insight that seeks to overwrite the world with its own blind intentions the very root of our

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<sup>4</sup> R. Emerson, *Nature*, cit. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

contemporary crises? Is not Emerson's final charge in *Nature* a noble, clarion call for industrial progress and environmental degradation in that we but half-impact the world around us? «Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit»<sup>6</sup>.

The final pages of *Nature*, however, may serve as a response to such objections and pave the way for more complex considerations by Emerson in later writing. By the half-force of humanity, like the half-sight of science, Emerson means that most of us work *on* our world—that is, develop a relation to nature and exercise power—by understanding alone. But, again, here lies the significant problem. We master nature «by penny-wisdom»<sup>7</sup>. We have learned the lessons of commodity and extractive economies, the capitalistic use of “fire, wind, water” into «steam, coal, and chemical agriculture»<sup>8</sup>. Alone, this amounts to a frugal employment of power. It fails to address the question of the ends of nature, a nature guided by its own laws, by forestalling it to a distant futurity, creating more problems than it solves. This form of perceived mastery alienates us from nature as well as ourselves. «The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps,” according to Emerson, “is because man is disunited with himself»<sup>9</sup>. The beckoning that we sense in the very opening of the ordinary relation we sense towards nature becomes, with our appropriation of the forces of nature, a mute signal of nature's dissolution that is already echoed within the opening to our approach to nature. The complexities of the current environmental crises, rooted in Romantic and Transcendentalist conceptions, can all be found here. *Qua* Emerson, in spite of the nobility with which we idealize Nature, the Anthropocene can be anticipated teleologically within our historical horizons even as we push our responsibilities towards a distant future.

Emerson calls for a reconsideration of our relation to this ideal Nature and it is from within this call and its historical nature that we must reconsider our relation.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

There is the possibility, unexplored but nevertheless present in Emerson, of *another* originary relation to nature, one that is neither a mutation of our current negligent relation nor a different way of defining our cultural present, but an acknowledgement of our historical affinities with Emerson's transcendentalism even as the idealism of his position, of nature in service to humanity, is inverted. Thinking with Emerson becomes a way of distancing ourselves from him. Timothy Clark illuminates this position in identifying «how deeply inherited modes of thought and practice are contaminated by unintended side effects, producing a general retrospective derangement of meaning»<sup>10</sup> Now that, as he suggests, our historicist notions of “original context” look more like “kinds of containment”. Indeed, according to Clark, «the more degraded and dangerous the once-natural environment becomes, the more the future or possible futures will insist on themselves as part of any context to be considered or critical method to be used»<sup>11</sup>. This temporal reconfiguration, an answer to a beckoning (back) towards a forgotten context, means that we, who were once the inheritors of the transcendentalists' future, are now throw (back) into their original context. What is the approach we should take to a nature world that, still, beckons us? It is as if our ways of approaching nature have been both ruined and reaffirmed by the Anthropocene.

The challenges of historical thinking, establishing horizons and imagining *renewable* originary relations and world rebuilding also occupy prominent places in Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to philosophical hermeneutics and can also be useful for addressing the discourses of the contemporary ecological crises we face. Indeed, hermeneutics should be treated as a discourse that helps us to develop an appropriate response to the challenges posed by these circumstances. Underpinning this insight, we must turn to the logic of hermeneutical thought itself and Gadamer's unique insights that, like Emerson, anticipated certain core problems raised by the philosophy of the Anthropocene as well as the means through which these problems can be addressed or discarded.

<sup>10</sup> T. Clark, *The Deconstructive Turn in Environmental Criticism*, in «symplokē», 2013 (16), pp. 11-26.

<sup>11</sup> T. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, Bloomsbury, London 2015, p. 66.

At first glance, much like the Emersonian epithet in *Nature* to “build therefore your own world,” Gadamer’s fundamental positions appear antithetical to contemporary philosophical and cultural responses to the contemporary climate crises. Alternatives that would support ecocritical positions seem to fly in the face of the values that both Emerson and Gadamer insisted on: European or emerging American anthropocentrism and the boundaries separating humanity from other beings, the deeply seated primacy of the Western humanistic tradition, and the privileging of the ideal nature of reality. As Clark and others continue to remind us, while the risks associated with the Anthropocene are serious, positioning philosophical frameworks like hermeneutics as an outmoded adversary of ecocritical humanism may be based on a limited interpretation of the spirit of the hermeneutical project. More nuanced insight into the logic of hermeneutical thought would allow us to see it as a discourse that may yet help us to come to grips with the underlying issues we face in a way that guides us in developing a more hermeneutically sufficient approach to them. It encourages us to look at the Anthropocene not as a settled scientific matter beyond the scope of philosophical inquiry or a calcified set of positions within a fixed ontological frame, one that breeds panic and discontent, but, rather, as an historical process which hermeneutical thinking continues to provide actionable insights.

According to Gadamerian hermeneutics, *understanding*, more than knowledge or Emersonian penny-wise science, is the basic practice through which human beings refer to and participate in the world. Unlike epistemology, operating according to objective laws, understanding is a process rooted and validated in its own temporal unfolding. It does not consist of the methodical formulation of establishing judgments about the world, but positions itself at the source of its own existence, indicating an existential condition through which human beings must always find and renew their bearings. Since it concerns the totality of human experience within history, understanding always widens the horizons it designates. The widening of the horizon of experience is a key concept for deciphering the ways in which the hermeneutic project lends itself to grappling with contemporary issues, one which pulls alterity and the non-human, the wide variety of life upon earth, into humanity’s understanding of

itself and its actions. Since understanding is historical then, it is by definition called to answer conditions similar to the environmental crises we face. Like Emerson, some of the problems we have identified concerning contemporary Anthropocene discourses had already been noted, in the way that the Anthropocene mutates our relationship to history, by Gadamer in his seminal text, *Truth and Method*. One of the text's core adversaries is an emerging fascination with technology that has led to a rapid fetishization of technological innovation as an epistemological model. With this in mind, one can begin to intuit a foretelling of what has come to be known as the *Great Acceleration*, a period after World War II when, as a result of the economic recovery and the emergence of the Cold War, there was an unprecedented increase in the exploitation of natural resources and a consequent rapid intensification of human impact on the environment. Modifying Emerson's "originary relation," what we might again posit as a double originary relation of the human to the natural worlds in the Anthropocene can be discovered in *techne* as both creation and destruction. Therefore, in a sense, the task of a reliable justification of humanistic inquiry that Gadamer sets for himself in *Truth and Method* is inseparably connected with an opposition to the logic of the modern natural sciences which projects in advance «a field of objects such that to know them is to govern them», resulting in an Emersonian «objectivizing of it [the world] and making it available for whatever purposes it [science] likes»<sup>12</sup>. This approach, despite numerous warnings, still controls our cultural, capitalistic and political order, even if the natural sciences and their beneficiaries in industry and governments have slowly, if hesitantly, begun to acknowledge its costs.

From this perspective one can even say that the scientific reflection on the Anthropocene has a fundamentally hermeneutical nature, since it comes to grips with Gadamerian insights and deeply questions the certainties of modern sciences. But one must do more than simply acknowledge the truth of these insights. Given that every science is a kind of Gadamerian understanding, the Anthropocene discourse should be «concerned with the "scientific" integrity of acknowledging the commitment

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<sup>12</sup> H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by J. Weinsheimer-D.G. Marshall, Continuum, London and New York 2004, pp. 449-50.



involved in all understanding»<sup>13</sup>. For this reason, even though Gadamer may very well agree with the diagnosis of the Great Acceleration as the start date of the Anthropocene, one should bear in mind that this is not a mere scientific fact, but rather a historical process which self-presents itself in its results and interpretations. Thus, today's context allows us to treat *Truth and Method* as a theoretical basis for the development of the problem of understanding at the time of the Anthropocene and, indeed the problem of time in its relationship to the understanding within an historical perspective.

This association of natural sciences to what we might call a kind of Anthropocene thinking can be discovered more deeply in Gadamer's examination of prejudices. For Gadamerian hermeneutics, prejudices exist as the very possibility of any involvement, an Emersonian originary relation writ large. Every form of understanding comes from some unidentifiable premise, situating itself in a particular tradition and addressing the issues of particular socio-cultural order, even if remaining dimly aware of it. That is why, for example, the overcoming of prejudices, advanced by Enlightenment philosophers, is itself an unstated prejudice of universal reason, whereas in fact prejudices are, according to Gadamer, «conditions of understanding»<sup>14</sup>, and the «true historical being (remains aware that) even where life changes violently, as in ages of revolution, far more of the old is preserved in the supposed transformation of everything than anyone knows»<sup>15</sup>. All this does not mean that we are enslaved by the drift of own prejudices. On the contrary, the task of understanding constitutes each time separating the appropriate prejudices from the wrong ones, or, those «by which we *misunderstand*»<sup>16</sup>. In order to make such a separation, however, we have to take account of our own historical situation and the tasks and problems it poses for us. The question of prejudices is therefore inseparable from historicity: it is the fact that something strikes us at a particular moment that encourages us to verify our prejudices. We may well suggest, at this point, that Emerson's "originary relation" functions as a kind of prejudice we have towards the natural world that is open to our

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

intervention, one that situates us historically within that relation and deepens our Gadamerian understanding of it.

If understanding is, then, essentially, a «historically affected event»<sup>17</sup>, and «consciousness of being affected by history is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation»<sup>18</sup>, then one can say in the context of the Anthropocene that whether we treat the natural environment subjectively as a partner, or instrumentally as a source of so-called natural “resources,” turns out to be the result of our well-situated hermeneutic consciousness (which means, properly responding to its own historicity suffering from an all-extensive ecological crisis) or poorly situated hermeneutic consciousness (which means, ignoring this very historicity). The notion of the history of this effect also reveals that the awareness of the historical process that takes place in front of our eyes confronts us with the task of cultivating an adequate hermeneutic understanding of the Anthropocene.

Rather than simply applying hermeneutics to the climate crisis, then, or reject it out of hand as a contributor to it, one must acknowledge the Anthropocene as one the hermeneutic horizon(s) of our time, reflectively ingraining itself within our practices of understanding, even if we are not always aware of it «(philosophical hermeneutics concerns) not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing»<sup>19</sup>) and putting us in front of ecological, ethical and political challenges that concern non-human others. Indeed, the task posed by the hermeneutic horizon(s) grasped in such a way would be a radical re-evaluation of the ideas about the place of a human in the world, a place in which we are deeply invested, aimed at establishing a *sustainable* hermeneutical community, one that maintains itself even as it beckons for our non-centric participation, one that includes not only the broad spectrum of the biosphere but also inanimate elements within a renewed understanding of nature.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

Later writing by Gadamer begin to show an emergence of this sustainable form of hermeneutical understanding<sup>20</sup>. In *The Diversity of Europe*, for example, Gadamer begins to imagine nature as a “partner” rather than a mute object available for ideal and capitalistic appropriation:

«Nature can no longer be viewed as a mere object for exploitation, it must be experienced as a partner *in all its appearances*; but that means it must be understood as the other with whom we live together. ... We may perhaps survive as humanity if we would be able to learn that we may not simply exploit our means of power and effective possibilities, but must learn to stop and respect the other as an other, whether it is nature or the ... cultures of peoples and nations; and if we would be able to learn to experience the other and the others, as the other of our self, in order to participate with one another»<sup>21</sup>.

Here, we can imagine resituating Emerson’s still resonant cry to “build, therefore, your own world” as a form of creating a kind of community in which the horizon is not center on human experience but on a doubled experience of the human and the non-human others that constitute our lifeworld in the Anthropocene. For the hermeneutic community to experience nature as a partner, then, as the other with whom we participate in each other, it means its radical extension beyond the human community.

The challenges present here, to answer the beckoning of nature, one rooted in a proleptic originary relation or founding prejudice, are found equally in the need to extend the concept of Gadamerian understanding and Emersonian perception, both which are rooted in the sense of *building*, to the discursive and physical worlds we inhabit as well as their respective zones of contact. As much as we stand shoulder to shoulder with writers like Kate Rigby and her call for environmental humanism<sup>22</sup>, it

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<sup>20</sup> For additional insights in the evolution of Gadamer’s positions, note P. Szaj, *Hermeneutics at the Time of the Anthropocene: The Case of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, in «Environmental Values», 2021, pp. 235-254.

<sup>21</sup> H-G. Gadamer, *The diversity of Europe: inheritance and future*, in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, trans. by L. Schmidt, M. Reuss. State University of New York, Albany 1992, pp. 232-236.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr., K. Rigby, *Discoursing on disaster: the hermeneutics of environmental catastrophe*, in «Tamkang Review», 2008, pp. 19-40.

is equally true that we must go on living on a planet that will have been shaped by the Anthropocene. In texts like *Arts of Living on A Damaged Planet*, we are offered new hermeneutic interpretive frameworks as well as post-transcendentalist ideologies that provide us with ways of reckoning with double horizons that are participatory as well as perceived, or, a doubly inscribed hermeneutic circle that is both written and erased. Emerson's building here is a kind of *taking place*, an event. The ghostliness of our natural world, then, takes place between thriving and the inevitable decay that beckons its human inhabitants:

«As humans reshape the landscape, we forget what was there before. Ecologists call this forgetting the “shifting baseline syndrome.” Our newly shaped and ruined landscapes become the new reality. Admiring one landscape and its biological entanglements often entails forgetting many others. Forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others. Yet ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces. Ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present—a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction. Deep histories tumble in unruly graves that are bulldozed into gardens of Progress. Ghosts ... are weeds that whisper tales of the many pasts and yet-to-comes that surround us. Considered through ghosts and weeds, worlds have ended many times before»<sup>23</sup>.

In the time of the Anthropocene, we are left with what has been written to a future that has come to pass. In the language of Maurice Blanchot, we are invoking here the drift of the *disaster*. For Blanchot, disasters, even if inevitable, implicate the discourses and times in which they transpire:

«The question concerning the disaster is a part of the disaster: it is not an interrogation, but a prayer, an entreaty, a call for help. The disaster appeals to the disaster that the idea of salvation, of redemption might not yet be affirmed, and might, drifting debris, sustain fear. The disaster: inopportune»<sup>24</sup>.

The writing of the disaster, then, is not to redeem disaster, clean it up, make it

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<sup>23</sup> E. Gan, A. Tsing, H. Swanson, N. Bubandt, *Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene*, in E. Gan – N. Bubandt (eds.) *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2017, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 1986, p. 19.

survivable and narratable per se. With Blanchot as guide, in writing the disaster one comes to terms with how forms of writing are contaminated in advance, as we all are. The planet is already suffering from contagion; disaster is already part of its conditions of possibility.

Efforts to reinscribe an originary relation qua Emerson that we recall through our foundational prejudices means widening or drawing connections with a world that is both non-human and becoming increasing ahuman in its shape. Living within this era of continuous and already inopportune catastrophe does not mean that humanistic thinking, building, or thriving has no role to play and that activism must be pursued at all costs. Instead of trying to render ourselves and the world pristine, to return to an illusory redeemed natural world, we should continue to think through and alongside a lifeworld contaminated by our own practices. And yet it is also crucial to understand that our understanding of the Anthropocene is itself a part of our originary relation to the natural world and a fundamental prejudice that we exhibit. If, in the inopportune time of the unfolding of the Anthropocene, we are thrown into historicity of writers and thinkers such as Emerson and Gadamer, occupying a present and past as the horizons of our experiences, we must learn to live and experience a world from which we have been decentered and that yet beckons us, still.