

Emmet Performs Emerson in the Wild: Nature, Cities, Gardens & Slavery

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Last spring, the English Department theatre group Emmet gave four productions of their latest creation *Emerson in the Wild*. Composed of a cast of nine, the play was devised during the workshops of the spring semester, between February and May 2014, and was based on the writings of the two key American transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). A peculiarity of these productions was that they were performed outdoors, in parks, so as to allow the writers' words to resonate with natural environments, thus emphasizing some of the play's central concerns: What is the relation of increasingly urban populations with nature? Is the kind of radical "civil disobedience" advocated by Thoreau still imaginable today? Or have such emancipatory visionary projects been subsumed under the normative imperatives of consensus during times of economic duress?

Open to students but also to alumni and external participants, Emmet has launched a series of dislocated productions over the last few years. *Blake's Revolution* (April 2013) was performed in La Cité Bleue, *A Winter's Tale* (December 2013) in the hall of Uni Bastions, and *Emerson in the Wild* (May 2014) in the campus park at the University of Lausanne, as well as in the garden of the art foundation Utopiana, on the grounds of the Château de Penthes, and in the Botanical Gardens of Geneva. The last-mentioned production was particularly meaningful as the fauna, plants, and trees not only formed the backdrop and immediate referent to which the play alluded but also featured as an integral part of the production through our collaboration with the Geneva Slackline Association.¹

In each new location, the actors – cast as a collective, alternatively or simultaneously exploring multiple facets of the personalities of our two authors – would lead audiences on a preliminary walk through the meanderings of Thoreau's life. When seated on the straw mats set out as a semi-circular auditorium for the production, the play then narrated Thoreau's premature departure from academia and business, his autodidactic study of nature and stern rejections of easy social conveniences, as well as how his knowledge

¹ Slackline is a recent urban sport where practitioners stretch a set of horizontal cables between two or more tree trunks and perform acrobatic feats about a meter off of the ground.

of the environment brought about a philosophy of life and poetic insight incompatible with the slack morality which, to him, pervaded and corrupted city life. Described as a character of wit, passion, and ruthless sternness bordering on egotism, Emerson's moving eulogy to his departed friend was thus animated by the proteiform chorus of actors through impersonations, anecdotes, and the silent movements of the observer discerning the deeper dynamics of nature in the breeding patterns of fish, the reproductive cycles of plants, or the migratory habits of birds.

About half-way through the action, the play came to a standstill as the chorus-turned-congregation mourned the departed Thoreau through Emerson's elegiac stanza:

It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,
As if by secret sign he knew
Where in far fields the orchis grew.

Yet, at this point a sudden shift occurred as a youthful Thoreau emerged from behind the congregation speaking his own words and the audience witnessed the somewhat idealized image depicted by his more conservative friend shatter to pieces at the incandescent contact of this youth, whose radical energy was targeted at the political compliance of a people maintaining the status quo with regards to slavery in 1848.

Thoreau's rhetoric is imbued with a poetic, a poetic grounded in a way of life where experience and judgment cannot be conceded or delegated to others but have to be understood first-hand. His thirst for truth, though perhaps elitist, was never solipsistic as his ideals reached out to a collective humanity, reminding us that it is always in the present experience of a community that vigilance towards the foundations of a society (be it religious or constitutional) should be exercised.

It seemed to us that, though the stakes may have changed, Thoreau's provocative statements might still be applicable today. Facing the major climate crisis already underway, it might be time once again to question our relation to nature, the food chain, the place of consumption in the Western way of life, as well as our roles as agents in democratic systems. At his most radical, Thoreau advances the case for activism. Is this a cry to which our ears are still attuned today, facing the complexity of the challenges that lie ahead?

Thoreau's piques towards the State have always carried with them the deep ambition that humanity might rise to the existential challenge of social improvement – a humble and

difficult endeavour, both collective and deeply subjective:

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth; – certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. [...] For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. (Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* 234-5)²

Emmet's Autumn 2014 Production:
Anne Carson's Antigonick
 MARLON ARIYASINGHE

Throughout the course of the autumn semester, Emmet will work with Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (2012), a translation of Sophocles' prolific tragedy *Antigone*, with the production taking place at the end of the semester. Carson's *Antigonick* is more of a reinterpretation than an actual translation of Sophocles' text, with cynical, but hilarious, one-liners popping up at odd times, adding to or relieving the dramatic tension of the play. Notably, there is an ever-present "Nick" character, equipped with a measuring tape, who silently measures things that are found on-stage. The piece was reviewed and even performed (as a staged reading) by none other than Judith Butler, so if you have always wanted to portray a strong tragic female lead who openly fights against the patriarchal order, or a male tragic figure who is humbled by hubris, or a slightly neurotic sister who can't really make up her mind, or even a silent character who loves to measure things, this is the play for you.

Students, alumni, and outside participants who would like to join Emmet can register for the workshop at <http://www.a-c.ch/>.

For more details go to, <http://emmet.ch/> or contact marlon.ariyasinghe@gmail.com.

² Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden, Civil Disobedience and Other Writings*. William Rossi, ed. New York : W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.