

Liberal Arts 1 – Alison Farmer

Comparative Essay Oct 2007

For this comparative essay, I have chosen to explore the lives of Ralph Waldo Emerson (America 1803-1882) and Jean-Paul Sartre (France 1905-1980), as I just love the idea of an unlimited human potential that both their philosophies aspire to. They embarked from different ports, took similar voyages, but left us in very different places. Both writers have left us with a footprint of the underlying current of thought around at their times. A small investigation into the life-long art of Louise Bourgeois provides us with a rare porthole view of the tide of change we are presently sailing in.

The son of a Unitarian minister, Emerson was born in 1803 into a free America. Breaking away from the British and shedding all the heavy aristocracy and dominance that went with it, Emerson grew up unshackled and able to swim in an ocean of powerful optimism and exploration. Emerson immersed into the new age of Romanticism that emphasized intuition, imagination, and feeling, and was carried along with a new swell of interest in the common people and a changing attitude towards God. Diving deeper into this fresh pool of thought, Emerson anonymously published "Nature" (1836) that became the foundation of Transcendentalism. Influenced by an early reading of Montaigne and the idea of Non Dualism, Emerson sought to rid himself of old habits, traditions and social conformity. He replaced the Calvinist God of his upbringing with an underlying spiritual universal order in all things, and chose to look out onto the world with fresh senses rather than through the window of history and passed-on teachings. He believed that only through a new intuitive response to experience, rather

than a learnt one, could we all gain the “religion of revelation” – an ideal spiritual state. In “Nature”, he writes, “*The human soul can spiral upward toward the fully spiritual realm through natural forms and uses presented to it in its immediate experience*” (Emerson pg 358). He does not say it will be an easy journey, realizing that it takes an extraordinary effort to go against the current and carve your own way up the river to its very source, but if you can reach it then you will obtain a blissful rebirth, great and pure.

Emerson sought to give man back to himself and create a self-reliant individual that would not only benefit the individual, but also instill social responsibility to help humanity as a whole. His mystical view was not unlike that of Edward Harrisons’ (British physician 1766 -1838) UniGod that saw the Universe and God as everything, but beyond human understanding. He tried, with others, to finally drown the old mythic universe that God previously ruled and re-floated us into a world of wondrous magic and hope.

Within 25 years, a tidal wave of destruction from the other side of the sea would prove to dampen the air of optimism.

Sartre’s voyage launches in Paris 1905 amongst great European unrest. Spending 9 months as a prisoner of war in 1940, he saw only injustice in the world. Unlike Emerson, he saw no “religion of revelation”, no universal order, and no hope. Influenced by Immanuel Kant’s (1724-1804) (who Emerson failed to read) thoughts on morality; “ *the source of the good lies not in anything outside the human subject, either in nature or given by God*” (Kant, wikipedia.org), Sartre starts from a scientific compartmentalized port, rather than the philosophical relatedness one Emerson

embarked from, to get to the hull of our beings. Sartre's Existentialist foundations agree with that of the Transcendentalist belief that, even though it is not easy, we should follow our own intuition and discard old doctrines and habits, thereby taking responsibility for our actions. He and Emerson found themselves on similar courses to that of Confucius and Descartes in the idea that, you should conquer yourself rather than the world. However, he took away the spiritual unity that held the world, previous beliefs and us together; Sartre decided we were entirely on our own and he dissected us into many pieces. Although Sartre recognized the distress ensued upon the individual by another's presence in "the Look", in his fragmented approach, he failed to see how the many views we have could give us many irreconcilable personalities and leave us permanently in a state of 'Bad Faith'. We are left with a comparable image of Emerson's self-reliant man waiting to discover anew, emptying our hold of history so we often end up unstable, but he also removed Emerson's ocean of hope that kept us afloat during our repeatedly painful search for our true identities. In stripping us from all contexts, he left us languishing in dark murky waters, making no sense. He condemned us to be free.

Jerome S. Bruner thinks Freud and others like Sartre, though still lingering, have destroyed Emerson's mystical myth of the naturally happy man, and we have replaced it with contemporary myths such as the 'myth of creative wholeness'. Rather than experiencing the psychic relief and sharing provided by an external myth that Emerson gave us, Sartre has left us anguishing along an internalized one of the personal novel in a search for our own identities. "*The certitudes of externalization replaced by the anguish of the internal voyage*" (Bruner pg 286). He believes Art arises from a need for

us to create an external product out of our own internal dramas in search of some relief. The art of Louise Bourgeois is no exception; it is all about her own story as she tries to unravel the truth of the human condition. Using Bruner's spiral curriculum she revisits basic ideas, constantly spiraling back to earlier forms, repeatedly building upon them as she grapples with the fuller understanding connected to them.

Born in Paris 1911, Louise's early work was greatly influenced by European Surrealism that had emerged in Paris in the early 1920s out of the devastation of World War 1 and ideas brought up by Freud's psychoanalytic theories. A move to America in 1938 gave her the opportunity to experience the diluted ripple of optimism that still resided after Emerson travels. Deeply involved in the investigation of her own psyche, Louise has often been criticized as theatrical with portraits of betrayal, revenge, humiliation and repression. However, unlike other Sartre Artists only interested in the search for an often-tortured authenticity, "*Louise is not trying to express just an individual truth, but to provide some sort of path to understanding the mystery of human experience. It is not the triumph of the individual will, the ego above all, that she expresses, but the attempt to integrate the personal experience in the mystery of life.*" (Larry Qualls PAJ Vol 16). A small look at some of her work clearly shows a continuous move away from Sartre's nuclear influence into a lifelong search for something even greater than Emerson's cosmic search as she brings a feminine vision of wholeness onboard.

Early showings of her 'Personages' (monolithic, people-sized pieces) were originally exhibited as isolated figures, but gradually she began to group them in various configurations in realization that we should not be viewed in an isolated Sartre world. In

the “Blind Leading the Blind” 1947-9, she refers to the biblical parable, in which “*spiritual uncertainty is echoed or symbolized by physical instability*”(www.tate.org.uk), something Sartre’s ideology had created. A more recent work “I REDO” (one of 3 towers exhibited at the Tate Modern in 1999) is a tower with a double spiral staircase which allows two people to go up to a deck together and sit on a pair of chairs beneath four mirrors. Individuals are not only faced with observing the world from afar, others close by and themselves, but they are also being observed in their contemplation This complex work brings order and awareness to the public as they participate in the many chaotic views of the human condition that Sartre did not consider.

All through her work, Louise uses natural forms such as cells, rivers and spirals not only as metaphors and tools for control but as a connection to life, nature and the cosmic world we are an integral part of. Like Louise, many of today’s artists are working on the relationships between Heaven and Earth, Man and Nature, and Man and Man, being carried on the wave of societal thought that our recent lack of respect and worship of these vital connections has ensued chaos on the heavens, earth and us.

In her installation of “The Red Rooms” exhibited in NY in 1994, Louise manages to not only address the ideas of Emerson and Sartre but stretches our connections almost beyond our comprehension. Larry Qualls notes; “*Contained within the life-spiral of the battered brown doors is the pulsing vibrant red of blood, of life; it unifies and clarifies, bring past and present, the personal and the universal, into balance. It is balance she seeks in her art, an equilibrium that will enable the individual to function as a part of a social order.*” (Larry Qualls PAJ Vol 16)

Louise has been spiraling back to Emerson's time when art went beyond individual experience. By trying to restore the aura of mystery to art, mystery in the sense of the spiritual, she brings us back into balance. The spiral is widening as Louise brings the many lessons learned from Sartre's voyage and enfolds them into Emerson's. She has given us back some of Emerson's' sea of magic so that we can finally float out of Sartre's mud, but unlike either of the previous intuitive explorers, Louise does not ignore her past, but seeks understanding of it, thus giving us stability, renewed hope and a wider view of the human condition. Rejected by Feminists she has brought a feminine face to art without polarity, and continues to strive towards control of the daily chaos we all face by the inter-relatedness of our world and provide us with a vision of wholeness.

*"Art is not about art – Art is about life". (Louise Bourgeois)*

Though difficult to categorize at their time, Emerson and Sartre became great leaders and stand out as visionaries of their age. Even though Louise has been an artist for nearly 80 years it is only since the 1980s that she has started to gain recognition and can now be seen as a great Artist and a great leader in her field. If philosophers Hegel and Tolstoy are correct in their assumption that great leaders are illusory and just riding on the wave of the future, then we are on the very crest of a new age not yet defined in the spiral of our lives.

## Bibliography

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph\\_Waldo\\_Emerson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Waldo_Emerson)

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– Louise Bourgeois: the art of memory by Larry Qualls

Liberal Arts 1 course readings:

The Solitary Solidary: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Relatedness, A Vision of Wholeness

Myth and Identity, Jerome S. Bruner.