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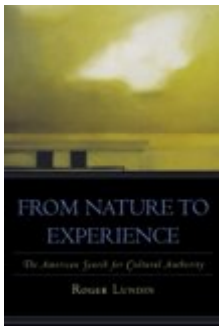
Roger Lundin. *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. vii + 202 pp. $26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7425-4840-4.



Reviewed by Michael LeFlem

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In this masterfully written book, Roger Lundin seeks to explore the origins of an intellectual crisis of authority, which beset American intellectuals over the course of two centuries. Beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Experience" (1841) and ending in a nuanced analysis of contemporary American pragmatism, Lundin demonstrates considerable talent in unraveling the complex story of cultural authority's shift from nature and revealed religion to personal experience. How American intellectuals during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came to conceive of their cultural authority on matters as diverse as God, societal organization, and the role of science in their everyday lives is among the questions that Lundin seeks to answer in *From Nature to Experience*.

Citing Emerson as the bellwether for the shift from grounding authority in nature and the transcendent to personal experience, Lundin's work represents a fairly novel interpretation of a trend whose scholars frequently take Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection as their point of departure. He argues that this transition from nature to experience was captured in the person of Emerson. Lundin claims, "For the Emerson of 'Experience' and for his contemporary pragmatic descendents, content as they are to 'skate among the surfaces,' there is neither hermeneutical depth to the world behind nature nor any interpretive heights to be scaled beyond experience" (p. 66). The author recreates this turbulent period of American intellectual history through a close reading of Emerson and his contemporaries' personal correspondence along with minor exegeses of key texts. Lundin attempts to show how this seminal American intellectual's crisis of cultural authority paved the way for latter-day philosophies of flux, embodied first in the early pragmatists, like Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and later in the full-bodied theories of contingency and irony proposed by Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty.

What is most enjoyable about this expertly argued work is Lundin's ability to jump from historical to literary sources with a grace rarely found in works of pure history. Not content to limit his inquiry to major works of philosophy or religious treatises, the author seeks cultural and intellectu-

al shifts in the poems of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, and in the short stories of Stephen Crane. Placing as much emphasis on cultural sources as he does on those of a more philosophical bent, Lundin draws on his training as a literary scholar to add a fresh angle to a field with no shortage of interpretations. This technique is also more than just a curiosity, as the despair felt by some of his poets and writers conveys the urgency of the themes at the heart of this book in a fashion that purely academic sources may not have been able to do. Describing the loss of spiritual certainty and our place in the natural world, Lundin uses a beautiful passage from Crane's short story "The Open Boat" published in 1894: "[We] desire to confront [in nature] a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: 'Yes, but I love myself.' A high cold star on a winter's night is the world [we] feel that she says to [us]. Thereafter [we] know the pathos of [our] situation" (p. 106). [1]

Indeed, this bleak post-Enlightenment landscape described in Crane's story is exemplary of the loss Lundin's figures seek to address in their struggles for meaning. With religion on the defensive after the Enlightenment's relentless attack on faith and scripture and later philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche carrying the torch of disbelief into the nineteenth century, American intellectuals around the turn of the century were increasingly at a loss to recover their former era's spiritual assurance. Tracing these shifts over a period stretching from roughly the middle of the nineteenth century to the tumultuous industrialization Henry Adams so eloquently described in ***The Education of Henry Adams*** (1918), to the twentieth-century apotheosis of pragmatism in the works of Rorty and Fish, Lundin is to be commended for his book's scope. And, while he states early in his book that he wishes "to be neither defensive nor presumptuous as he bears witness to" the power of Christian theology, he ever so briefly veers from this goal in a few instances (p. 13). For example, Rorty and Fish come under fire for promoting their agendas of contingency and tentative solutions to intellectual problems in more than a few chapters. As Lundin argues, "Rather than having the Son of God be born, suffer and die, Fish's theology 'celebrates' the 'invasion of the fortress of essence by the contingent' as though contingency was an intellectual court jester disrupting the pompous proceedings of the dastardly divine royals" (p. 96).

This is powerful rhetoric, and it may at times dismay secular readers, but they would do well to press on, as ***From Nature to Experience*** is one of the best examples of a work written from a religious perspective on a subject whose scholars tend to err on the side of freethinking. Lundin rarely, if ever, strays from the highest standards of historical and literary research to draw his conclusions, and if anything, the Christian faith, which looms in the background of his work, provides a personal, moving account of a scholar who is coming to grips with the very crisis he seeks to describe. For this, readers ought to be grateful, as too often works of this sort quickly degenerate into polemics against secular culture and the scientific method's alleged monopoly on knowledge. Lundin skillfully weaves together theological, literary, philosophical, and historical arguments and actors to create a rich work from which readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

In telling the story of how American intellectuals dealt with the loss of meaning in their world, Lundin's book will appeal to a broad range of scholars. From historians interested in pragmatism, to literary critics who seek to understand how climates of opinion changed at the turn of the century, to religious scholars attempting to reconcile their faith with the advances of modern philosophy, ***From Nature to Experience*** will undoubtedly prove useful. By utilizing a broad range of diverse sources, which are not traditionally captured in a single book, and writing with a daz-

zling flourish of the pen, Lundin has produced a truly inspiring addition to the field of American intellectual history.

Note

[1]. Stephen Crane, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. J. C. Levenson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 902.