Toward An American Self: Charles Burchfield's Early Years in Salem, Ohio, and at the Cleveland School of Art

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The complete title of this paper is "Toward an American Self: Charles Burchfield's Early Years in Salem, Ohio, and at the Cleveland School of Art." To begin I would say that Burchfield had two American selves—one a 19th century Emersonian self that developed out of the natural and cultural environment of his early years (1893, his birth, to about 1920), which I would call his authentic self and out of which came his best paintings: those of the early and late periods. The other was the self of his reputation as an American regionalist, or realist, painter between the World Wars, in his middle period (around 1920-1943), when he seems to have accommodated his painting to the market and the then-current conservative critical and popular admiration for all things "American."

Charles Burchfield was born in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, in 1893, and five years later, upon the death of his father, the family moved to Salem, Ohio. He developed an intense interest in nature and art at an early age and by the time of his high school graduation in 1911 he had recorded in his drawings meticulous details of local wildflowers, blossoming fruit trees, other trees, plants, and berries. Sensitive, shy and hard-working, he saved his money and went to the Cleveland School of Art; from 1912 to 1916 he worked his way through art school.

He had been reading nature writers, especially John Burroughs and Thoreau, and starting art school his ambition was to become a professional nature writer. In fact, his journals attest that he already was a nature writer. As a professional nature writer he would, he thought, illustrate his own writing with pictures of weather and seasons as well as plants, trees, and flowers. He decided to major in illustration at the art school because of this ambition, and also because a poor boy from a respectable family could make a living as an illustrator. When he changed his mind after a year or so at school, and decided to be an artist, not an illustrator, he told Frank Wilcox, a painter who taught at the Cleveland School of Art, who applauded his decision to join the ranks of true artists. Nevertheless, at school, Burchfield was most interested in classes in design and decorative illustration and was bored by those in life drawing. (Viktor Schreckengost recalls from his own Cleveland School of Art days as a student, ten or so years after Burchfield's graduation, the continuing gossip that Burchfield almost did not graduate because he was so poor in life drawing class.) It was nature in and around Wade Park, outside of the school building and the studio that most inspired his love of
beauty and emotional commitment to making art during his school years.

In school, William Eastman and Henry Keller as well as Frank Wilcox were his art teachers, Keller clearly the most influential. Keller was a very well-informed and sophisticated teacher, dedicated to teaching. The second year of Burchfield’s art school career, 1913, was the year Keller was in the Armory Show in New York City. Though Keller was not a European-style modernist himself, he was a defender of, a militant defender of, what Burchfield calls the “New Movement,” in his 1937 article on Keller, 21 years after his graduation.

Burchfield was always a reader as well as a writer. In his journals he records his impressions from his reading as well as from nature. Still at school, he wrote, on December 15, 1915, “that if I stopped to admire or sketch a tree, it was more of a prayer than meaningless phrases mumbled in church. I was delighted to find the same thought in Emerson’s Self-Reliance.” This interaction between his reading and his observation of nature is evident throughout his journals, in which he kept an almost daily account of his life from his high school days until a month before his death. J. Benjamin Townsend, the editor of the 10,000 pages of journal—writing incorporated into one 700 page volume titled The Poetry of Place calls the journals “a spiritual autobiography.”

That a solitary and independent self developed through an interaction with nature is an “Emersonian” self—or a spiritual self in a transcendental mode—is by now almost a convention of American art-historical discourse of nineteenth century landscape painting. But for Burchfield, in the early years of the twentieth century in Ohio, it was his very own immediate and authentic discovery. Looking back on the nineteenth and twentieth century I see his development as a remarkably clear example of Emerson’s continuing influence on American cultural history.

Turning to the journals, I would like to look at entries from the early years that reveal Burchfield as person and awakening artist standing in the woods as a “transparent eyeball,” which is what Emerson calls his representative man in his 1836 essay “Nature.” In February, 1915, Burchfield in Cleveland writes: “...sketching in the park. The sky is such a wonderful blue that I fear I’ll miss some of its beauty if I do not gaze at it all the time...How it thrilled me! As I write I am beset with the same feeling as when looking at the sky—I fear that I may write too little of its beauty.”

And then in March, in Cleveland at school the same year, there is this early record of the changing and abundant weather of his favorite month: “I saw the weather was entirely changed...the air was clear and cold; a riotous wind came from off the ice-clogged lake...Thru Park by way of Wade Park Pond...Pond broken into waves by the wind...Turning to get the haze from my eyes, I saw a weird beauty in Doan Brook; how the wind swells were reflected in a net of silver light...”
There are many such entries and most much longer than my quotations here—but I want to leave Burchfield’s school days behind and look at his “golden year,” as he called it, the year after graduation, which he spent in his beloved hometown, Salem, Ohio, indulging an acute nostalgia for childhood memories. He had gone to New York City after graduation with a scholarship to study at the National Academy of Design, spent one day in class there and a few more weeks in the city and left the city, hating it, to return to Salem. In Salem, while supporting himself by working at the Mullins plant, in the accounting department, he made around 400 to 500 sketches and watercolor paintings of the approximately 4000 works attributed to him. In 1917 his style was moving toward a looser brush stroke, conveying mood, combined with almost calligraphic lines representing vibrating sounds from the earth or the air. His entries in the journal, still about nature, are shorter now as if he were always in a hurry to return to the obsessional painting of this “golden year.”

In 1921 he moved to Buffalo, New York having obtained a job as a wallpaper designer with the Birge wallpaper company there. In 1922 he married Bertha Kenreich of Greenford, Ohio; in 1923 they had the first of their five children; in 1925 they moved to Gardenville, a suburb of Buffalo, where he lived until his death. From roughly 1921 to 1943 is called his regionalist, or middle, period; and it is the time of his growing reputation as an American realist painter, painting houses and industrial scenes, seemingly deserted streets, often with a mood similar to that of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, which Burchfield had read upon its publication in 1919. These paintings sold so well in New York City at the Rehn gallery that he was able to support his large family through the Depression, after quitting his job at Birge and Company in 1929. Milton Brown states about this period in American art in general, that as “part of the post-war isolationist revulsion against Wilsonian internationalism, the [American realists]...sought a native tradition, a center of life typical of America and innocent of sophistication.” At this time, Burchfield painted American scenes for an American audience and justified such painting, though he seems uncomfortable with the concept, in his 1937 description of his old Cleveland School of Art teacher, Henry Keller. In “considering the career of Mr. Keller the word “regionalism” inevitably comes up. This term, heard frequently at present, is somehow distasteful to me as being...provincial in its implications. But there is more than one interpretation,” he adds, saying that the interpretation he respects is Mr. Keller’s belief that it is possible “to live and work for one locality and still reach out to the art...of the whole world.” Burchfield continues, “Mr Keller’s region...if he has one, is the whole middle-west...the whole vast area between our two great mountain systems. The idea that from this territory will come the future significant culture of America, is one of his favorite themes.”

This is more a rationalization of his own painting in the 1920s or 1930s than it is of Keller’s. During this time, Burchfield also wrote about his friend Edward Hopper, and from what he
says about Hopper we may project what he would say about his own American realist painting of this middle period:

"Edward Hopper is an American—nowhere but in America could such an art have come into being. But its underlying classical nature prevents its being national or local in its appeal. It is my conviction... that the bridge to international appreciation is the national bias, providing, of course, it is subconscious. An artist to gain a world audience must belong to his own peculiar time and place; the self-conscious internationalists, no less than the self-conscious nationalists, generally achieve nothing but sterility."

Once Burchfield's reputation was made in New York galleries and museums and in the prize-giving institutions of the nation, he could afford to abandon the American realist self— a kind of disguised self about which he was always and now increasingly ambivalent. He reveals this ambivalence during the years of World War II, feeling useless in the war emergency and on another level in his journal about the loss of the "poetic" in himself and in his work. In 1943 he returned to painting nature, and it is a nature now enlarged to include the fantastic and visionary.

John Baur and Matthew Baigell, the two pre-eminent Burchfield biographers, believe that Burchfield was a nature painter all along. Baur, best known perhaps for his writing on American luminist painters, views Burchfield as a "pantheist"; and, talking about the late period, Baigell says, "It is as if he wanted to enter ever deeper into the world of spiritual forces." Jay Grimm, whose unpublished thesis Charles Burchfield and the Myth Making of America is a psychoanalytic reading of the biography, believes that the return to the early nature painting in 1943 is a regression to childhood. In my opinion, it is, or may be, all these things, but (more significantly) I think it is a re-assertion of Burchfield's early self, an Emersonian self-reliant self that finds its authenticity and meaning in nature. With this re-assertion, there is clearly a strengthening of the transcendentalist, or spiritual, element of the Emersonian gestalt.

In 1943, Burchfield returned not only to nature but to the actual unfinished work of the early period (especially 1917), and in keeping with his own maturity expanded that work in such a way that it became more expressionist and visionary and sometimes fantastic (and sometimes almost abstract) in its self-confident representation of a wondrous American nature. Through these paintings it seems to me that he rediscovers his lost- or misplaced-nineteenth century Emersonian American self.

It is perhaps an irony of history that the constructed and deliberate "American" painting that Burchfield undertook in the 1920s and 1930s—for the sake of "solidity and form," in his account, but more likely in a response to the temper of the times—should be overshadowed, as American painting, by his early and late work of the Emersonian self.
Endnotes


2. Ibid.


