愛默森《自然》中的超越觀與社會關懷

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摘 要

愛默森對超越主義的大力提倡，使不少讀者忽略他同時也是一位敏銳的社會批評家。事實上他的超越觀不僅關懷個人與大自然的和諧相處，亦注重個人與社會的密切互動。本論文不只研究愛默森所主張的天人合一，也特透過探討其對傳統、科學與宗教的改革呼籲，說明其社會關懷，以應證愛默森不但是大自然的祭司，也是熱衷的社會改革者。他的《自然》指出，一個真正的完人是在透過大自然涵養自我的同時，也能關懷及協助改革社會，以期日臻完美。

關鍵詞：超越觀、個人、大自然、社會、傳統、科學、宗教、社會關懷、完人

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Emerson’s Transcendental Vision
and Social Concern in *Nature*

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Abstract

Emerson’s great reputation as a spokesman for American Transcendentalism makes quite a few readers neglect the fact that he is also a very incisive social critic. In reality, his transcendental vision is concerned with not only the individual’s harmony with nature but also his close relationship with society. Thus, this paper aims to study both Emerson’s advocacy of the cultivation of the individual through his immersion in nature and Emerson’s social concern with tradition, science, and religion to illustrate that he is not merely a great priest of nature but also an acute proposer for social reforms. His *Nature* indicates that the complete man is the one who, besides cultivating individuality through the discipline of nature, can step out to engage himself in society and help bring society to an ideal state.

Key words: transcendental vision, the individual, nature, society, tradition, science, religion, social concern, the complete man

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Ralph Waldo Emerson's great reputation as a spokesman for American Transcendentalism overshadows the fact that he is also a very acute social critic. Many readers approach his works with a view to learning how to immerse themselves in nature so that they may get joy, comfort and enlightenment from it. Furthermore, as Emerson advocates so much the importance of nature and the individual, some critics even get to discuss him as "a remotely representative man peculiarly detached from the social circumstances of his age" (Cayton 113); however, such critics fail to see that Emerson "lived in an age of intense social ferment when a wave of humanitarian impulse, originating in Europe, swept America and led to the first great upsurge of social reform in the land" (Rao 9). In such a social environment, it was inevitable that Emerson became concerned about his contemporary society and got involved in quite a few social reforms of his age. In his correspondence with Carlyle he said, "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform" (Norton 334). In fact, Emerson’s transcendental vision is concerned not only with the individual’s harmony with nature but also with his close relationship with society. In other words, Emerson hopes that the transcendental vision he advocates will help bring about "both a changed world and a transformed individual within it" (Robinson 14). Thus, this paper aims to study both Emerson’s advocacy of the cultivation of the individual through his immersion in nature and Emerson’s social concern with tradition, science, and religion to illustrate that he is not merely a great priest of nature but also an incisive proposer for social reforms.

As the title Nature itself may be quite misleading and we "have grown used to finding in Nature Emerson's triumphant affirmation of his aggressive individuality, his celebration of his unmediated vision, the triumph of his ambitious selfhood” (Michael 69), not a few readers of Nature focus their attention mainly, or even only, on the relationship between the individual and nature, neglecting the important one between the individual and society, which is also a major concern of Emerson’s transcendental vision. Actually both relationships are important to Emerson, for he is concerned about both ME and NOT ME, which, according to what he says in Nature, includes not merely nature but society. Besides, the cultivation of the individual is to be achieved not just through his immersion in nature but also through his contact with society because while nature gives the individual delight and enlightenment, society provides him with "substantive being," the human contact and relationship, which give the rich "informations of the power and order that lie at the heart of things" (61). Moreover, as society is made up of individuals, the cultivation and reform of the individual are also part of the reform of the whole society. Alston strikes the point when he says that the "transformation of individuals could lead people to a new and better social order" (50). We may even say that the perfection of the individual is the first step toward building an ideal society.

As the perfection of society starts from the perfection of the individual through the education of nature, in discussing Emerson’s transcendental vision it is necessary to tackle
first the relationship between the individual and nature. Emerson believes that all individuals are potentially equal because they all come from the same source—God, the “Universal Spirit” (60), or what he calls the Over-Soul: "Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same" (60). Since in each individual there is a portion of the Over-Soul, he has original goodness and enormous potentialities. This belief leads Emerson to emphasize self-reliance: "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 " (81). To put it in another way, one only needs to rely on his intuitive perception as a guide of matter. And if all individuals can rely on themselves, then "[a] nation of [complete] men will for the first time exist" (105). Unfortunately, due to industrialization and division of labor, the individual is no longer a complete man as he gets more and more separated from nature and cannot anymore learn from it the spirit of wholeness, because nature, also created by God as man the individual, is still a complete whole. In consequence, the individual can no longer retain his original wholeness, but becomes just a part.

The individual gets even more diminished when “he cannot discover and validate within himself those powers that correspond to the powers around him’ (Bridges 4). The remedy for this suggested by Emerson is to not only re-sharpen the individual’s awareness and curiosity of what surrounds him but also re-strengthen his close relationship with nature. If the individual can get into a state of heightened awareness, he will “come as close to the secret heart of nature as [he] can . . .” (Robinson 104). Emerson points out that "behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present" (73). In other words, the Over-Soul or, as Emerson puts it, the “Universal Spirit” (60), pervades the whole universe, suffusing every animate creature and even every inanimate object. Thus, the whole nature is sparked with divinity and there is eternal Law behind the transparence of nature. In this sense nature is the incarnation and minister of the Over-Soul, and man, by immersing himself in nature and opening his soul, can not only get inspiration and enlightenment from nature but also link himself to and become akin to the Over-Soul. That is to say, if man can commune harmoniously with nature, nature will "[become] transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it" (54).

In the meantime, since both man and nature are "part or parcel of God" (39), they are intimately related. Thus, what man sees about him corresponds to what is going on within him and "the whole of natures [becomes] a metaphor of the human mind" (53); that is, nature becomes a projection of the human soul. In this way, we may say that nature not just works as the medium through which the Over-Soul speaks to man but also strives to lead him back to the Over-Soul. In order to fulfill this mediating function, nature has many powers. Firstly, it has the power to delight man, so "in the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man" (38). Secondly, nature can startle man: "It takes [man] by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or better emotion coming over [him]" (39).
Besides, nature serves as a healing fountain: "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone" (43). That's why "[t]he tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and the craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again" (43). Last but never the least, nature has the power to inspire and enlighten man: "Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things?" (49) In this way, man gets “conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life” (49).

In order for man to be influenced by the powers of nature, however, man must know nature first; and before he can know it, he must recover his ability to respond to it: "Until the man can experience his own response to the outer world, he cannot know the world" (Bridges 4). This recovery of man's ability to respond to nature will awaken his awareness and curiosity of the world around him. And if man can again become aware and curious about the world around him, he will keep on not merely getting delight from nature but also learning lessons from it. His life will become continual rebirth in which he will go on refreshing himself in the course of his experience in nature. Such a continual process of rebirth will ultimately lead him to share in the universal divinity and become re-united with the Over-Soul.

Though nature is the mediator between man and the Over-Soul, we should not neglect that it only opens the door to Truth. There remains much to be done by man. Nature is a phenomenon as well as a substance, and we need both understanding and reason, namely, transcendental perception, to grasp the Truth hidden behind it because nature offers “discipline of the understanding in the intellectual truths" (55) and teaches man the proper use of it--to transcend our physical understanding of nature; that is, to transcend our senses and understanding by our reason so that we may vision the Divine Truth. In other words, revelation is the influx of the Divine Mind into the mind of man, and such a natural course runs in the following way: First, man has joyful perception of nature. After perception comes meditation, from meditation comes insight, and finally the fusion of perception and insight brings about our vision of the Divine Truth. This natural course can be illustrated by the following famous passage:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. . . . Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (39)

This is an experience that shows the process of man's approaching Truth through his understanding of nature, his practical reason which experiences the presence of the Over-Soul in nature, and his speculative reason which perceives the divinity of the Over-Soul. This
process corresponds to what Emerson elaborates in the chapter, "Beauty."

1. First, the simple perception of natural form is a delight. . . . (42)

2. The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. . . . (45)

3. There is still another aspect under which the beauty of the world may be viewed, namely, as it becomes an object of the intellect. . . . (46)

The process begins with the simple perception of natural objects and phenomena, which is the work of understanding. This is our dealing with sensible objects and phenomena--"a constant exercise in the necessary lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being and seeming, of progressive arrangement; of ascent from particular to general; of combination to one end of manifold forces" (55). To a great extent, we may say that man's perception of nature through his understanding is his basic and, in a sense, lowest use of nature. This perception through understanding must be followed by the operation of his practical and speculative reason in order to get the transcendental vision of Truth.

Emerson discusses in the chapter, "Discipline," the different functions of understanding and reason: “The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity in this worthy scene. Meantime, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries matter and mind" (55). From this passage we may see that man needs Reason, including practical and speculative reason, to transcend his senses so as to vision the Divine Truth, for "[w]hen the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression" (64). Furthermore, "[i]f the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen . . .” (64). If man can reach so transcendental a stage, he, then, can really become a transparent eyeball that sees through the appearance of nature and gets the transcendental vision of the Divine Truth.

In spite of the importance of the cultivation of the individual through the discipline of nature, the individual, after the cultivation, should reach out for social contact so that he will not become an isolated island. Although Emerson advocates the significance of the individual as well as his relationship with nature, he is by no means anti-social. On the contrary, he is greatly concerned about his society. As Sara Ann Wider points out, Emerson is, in truth, also "an incisive voice, anatomizing the problems within society and offering a means toward their amendment" (66). Since he has firm faith in the boundless resources of the human mind and in the infinite perfectibility of the individual, he strongly believes that society, which is made up of individuals, is capable of improvement. Actually "his strong individualism . . . made him emphasize self-reform in reference to institutional reform and organized philanthropy" (Rao 34). He declares, "Let every man shovel out his own snow, and the whole
city will be passable” (Forbes 38). From what he says, we can infer that Emerson thinks that social reform begins with the reform of the individual because an ideal society is made up of the so-called complete men.

To Emerson, the duty of the cultivated self is to help reform society by acting as a spiritual leader—to awaken the torpid mass so as to bring society to a better state. Emerson likes to push his readers forward and is concerned about his relationship with them. He hopes that he may "[forge] the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and [give] them as angels of persuasion and command" (58). Eagerly he wishes to be an Orphic poet, singing to his readers and persuading them to reform themselves as individuals and then help reform the society as a whole. This relationship between the author and his readers is reflected in Nature as the relationship between the individual and society.

In a high degree, Emerson is a dualistic thinker and often sees things from a dualistic point of view. This viewpoint may be applied to our study of the relationship between the individual and society in Nature. Some readers tend to see the individual and society as in conflict with each other, for society may impinge upon the individual; however, they fail to see that society and the individual may also complement each other. The individual is an integral part of society, while society, at the same time, provides " substantive being" (72) to the individual so that the individual can have a ground for not only getting into contact with others but also contributing to society:

We are associated . . . with some friends, who, like skies and waters, are coextensive with our idea; who, answering each to a certain affection of the soul, satisfy our desire on that side; whom we lack power to put at such focal distance from us, that we can mend or even analyze them. We cannot choose but love them. (61)

If the individual is detached from society and gets only indulged in his own self-cultivation and ideals, then this kind of idealism just “leaves [him] in the . . . labyrinth of [his] perceptions, to wander without end. The heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantive being to men and women” (72). No man can be detached completely from society, and transcendental reflection must be based on the substantial world. After all, we can “pursue our higher, freer, more spiritual goals only after sating our lower [physical and social] ones” (Turner 3). In a word, according to Emerson’s transcendental vision, the individual, besides immersion in nature, also needs social relationship and involvement for his cultivation and perfection.

Though Emerson in Nature does not systematically and detailedly show readers how to reform society, he does point out what the individual should help reform in order to build an ideal society. To a great extent, in Nature Emerson’s social concern can be seen in his proposal for changing people’s attitudes towards tradition, science, and religion.
Emerson says at the very beginning of *Nature*, "Our age is retrospective" (35). Why is it retrospective? Because people value too much the past and follow tradition blindly. As a result, they see the world through the eyes of the past generations. But, it should be noticed that Emerson does not reject tradition completely. Good tradition is still to be valued; only out-dated one should be discarded. It is the duty of the cultivated individual to remind people to assimilate good tradition and transform it according to their own need. As Emerson indicates in "The American Scholar," the second greatest influence into the spirit of [man] is the mind of the past. . . . Books are the best type of the influence of the past" (87). Of course, "the [man] of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth" (87). But sometimes when man is in spiritual darkness, that is, "when the intervals of darkness come" (89) so that he cannot grasp truth, then, he has to resort to books, the best kind of the influence of the past. Still, when man can read the Over-Soul directly, why then should he "grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?" (35) Instead, relying upon himself, he should commune directly with nature, meditate deeply, and write books for his own age.

Another thing Emerson thinks that the individual should help to correct is the scientism of his age. As we know, the nineteenth century is an age of scientific discovery and industrial progress. Men's thinking gets more and more empirical and materialistic, while spiritual life is seriously undervalued. It is against such utilitarian philosophy that Emerson launches his attack. He is against the scientism and materialism of much modern thought: "Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and by the very knowledge of functions and processes to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole" (74). In other words, empirical science dissects the world into broken pieces, peeling it layer after layer; however, what it finally gets is not unity nor truth, but fragments of knowledge. Seeing such scientism, Emerson declares that the best read scientist really devoted to the search for truth is the one that will relate his search to the world, not by any addition or subtraction, but "by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery . . ." (74). That is, he must bear in mind that scientific study does not preclude spiritual life (Turner 2). On the contrary, scientific study should be conducted in such a way that it will not merely facilitate man's spiritual pursuit but also enhance his spiritual life. Or else, what is the value of scientific study if it just reduces man to the status of animals or even machines?

The individual also needs to help reform religion because it has an "effect . . . in degrading nature and suggesting its dependence on spirit" (69). Religion disparages the visible as well as the substantial and neglects that behind all natural objects and phenomena there exist a unifying power and “laws governing all appearances” (Robinson 102). Some theosophists even show “a certain hostility and indignation” (69) toward nature; however, in over-emphasizing spirit at the expense of nature, they fail to see the correspondence between
nature and spirit, between the external world and the internal mind. As a result, religion has
got to lose its connection with nature, and the lesson it teaches is that “[t]he things that are
seen, are temporal; the things that are unseen, are eternal” (69). In this way, religion ”"put[s]
nature under foot” (69). In order to reform this religious phenomenon, Emerson calls for the
reunion of religion and nature, that is, the "identification of human being and natural being on
which all morals and all religion depend, [for to] have character in its highest form is to align
one's self with those spiritual laws which are transparent in nature” (Ahlstron 51).

In addition, religion has become a collection of rites instead of the doctrine of the soul;
that is, the causes of the decadence of modern religion are that religion is no longer “the
doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of . . . the ritual” (ll4) and that the "Law of
laws . . . whose revelations introduce greatness . . . into the open soul, is not explored as the
fountain of the established teaching in society” (117). In Emerson’s age, historical
Christianity, instead of a living faith, was preached, signified by reliance on respect for the
person of Jesus Christ rather than the principles he stood for (Robinson 17). Besides,
Emerson observes that people have come to neglect that man’s relationship to God is to be
established directly by the individual rather than through a ritualistic church. They have come
to speak of religious revelations “as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead”
(116). Consequently, people lose their faith in religion. Seeing this condition, Emerson
declares that the duty of the intellectual is to help reform religion by advocating the
individual’s direct communion with God without the intercession of institutions or rites.

From what has been discussed above, it can be concluded that Nature is not only Emerson's major statement of the Transcendental creed but also his first exposition of the
individual’s relationship with nature and society. The work shows that his transcendental
vision is concerned with the cultivation of the individual not only through his immersion in
nature but also through his social involvement. As mentioned previously in this paper, the
relationship between the individual and nature and that between the self and society are not in
conflict with each other; rather, they can complement each other. The reform of society must
start with the reform of the individual, and the cultivation of the individual is the reopening
of the lines of communication with not just nature but also society. The real complete man
is the one who, besides the cultivation of the individual through the discipline of nature, can
step out to concern himself with society and help bring society to an ideal state. In brief, if
the individual can cultivate his transcendental vision through strengthening his relationship
with both nature and society, then, what is to be achieved is not only the perfection of the
individual but the perfection of society.
Notes

1 Emerson points out in Nature that "all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE" (Ziff 36). However, this "Nature" (capitalized) has too broad a meaning to be used in this paper; therefore, I will use "nature" (uncapitalized) to refer to "essence unchanged by man: space, the air, the river, the leaf, [etc.]" (Ziff 36), and nature in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, carries this meaning.

2 William Harmon observes that most "transcendentalists were by nature reformers. . . . Most of the reforms were attempts to regenerate the human spirit . . . " (525).

3 Larger Ziff, ed., Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 72. Hereafter phrases or sentences within quotation marks yet without note numbers after them mean that they are quoted from this collection of essays. The numbers of pages on which the quotations appear will be put in parentheses after them.

Works Cited


