

The Dual Emerson: Poetical Writing and Philosophical Thinking*

双重爱默生：诗性写作与哲性思考

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Abstract: Emerson is many things to readers: a lecturer, an essayist, a philosopher, a thinker, a poet, and even a preacher. To assign Emerson to a single category is neither possible nor necessary, for his writing characteristically traverses many categories and thus defies a single monolithic label. Versed both in Hellenism and Hebrew-Christian culture—with the former mainly pertaining to artistic beauty appealing to sensual satisfaction, and the latter to didactic moral teachings appealing to the soul—Emerson employs a Hellenistic style of writing that is poetical in expression and form, which requires a creative spirit that both perceives and expresses poetically. Poetic perception originates from the intuition and inspiration in the mind, and by the power of imagination, finally arrives at a vision of the truth. In the process of transference from vision to words, Emerson uses poetic expression, blending symbolic language and essay form to create an organic whole with grand ideas. Emerson also inherits the Christian tradition, which emphasizes a philosophical conception of moral teaching. He firmly believes that there is a just law upholding a harmonious universe, which he calls the Moral Law, and that each human being has the ability to intuit this Moral Law and act in harmony with it, which Emerson calls the Moral Nature or the Soul. In this essay, I will focus on these two sides of Emerson and, with the support of detailed analysis and interpretation of his dual characteristics, argue that these two sides do not counteract each other in his writings, but rather reinforce each other: poetical writing acts as the emotional dimension, affective and appealing to the emotions, while philosophical thinking acts as the rational dimension that is profound and thought-provoking to the mind. In this sense, Emerson is apt to be termed as a poetical philosopher.

Keywords: Emerson; poetical writing; philosophical thinking; poetical philosopher

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802—1883) is a major figure in the transcendental movement of nineteenth-century America. He was a very productive writer, and his oeuvre includes journals, sermons, lectures, essays, and poems. Because of his multiple talents and habitual traversing of different genres and forms, it is difficult to categorize Emerson: is he a poet, following Octavius Brooks Frothingham remarks that his “place is among poetic, not among philosophic minds” and that “he belongs to the order of imaginative men,”¹ and Robert Frost’s declaration that he is the great American poet—one of the four great Americans, the peer in poetry of Washington in war and statecraft, or Jefferson in political thinking, and of Lincoln in saving his country?² Or is he a philosopher, since John Dewey rates him as “the one citizen of the New World fit to have his name uttered in the same breath with that of Plato” and a “philosopher of democracy,”³ and George Santayana esteems him as “certainly a fixed star in the firmament of philosophy”?⁴ This is a hard question to answer, and over the decades researchers have contributed their answers to this question either way.⁵ In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the entry for Ralph Waldo Emerson contains the following:

If propounded by a philosopher, Emerson’s assertions concerning “correspondence” and “compensation” would demand further explication and defense. But to expect anything resembling epistemological lucidity, or even concern, in a writer like Emerson would be to approach him with misconceptions. Indeed, these who read him as one would a philosopher like Kant, Schelling, Hegel, or even Coleridge (all of whom certainly had a great influence

¹ Milton R. Konviz, ed., “Emerson the Seer,” in *The Recognition of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Selected Criticism Since 1837* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 11.

² Robert Frost, “On Emerson,” in *Daedalus*, vol. 134, no. 4, 50 Years (Fall, 2005), 186–90.

³ John Dewey, “Emerson: The Philosopher of Democracy,” *International Journal of Ethics* 13, no. 4 (July 1903): 405–13; William James, *Memories and Studies* (New York: Longmans, 1911), 18–34. In the history of American philosophy, Emerson deserved recognition as a “practical idealist” with Jefferson and Franklin before him and William James and John Dewey after him.

⁴ Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher, eds., *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 38.

⁵ Joel Berto’s book *Emerson as a Poet* (New York: M. Holbrook, 1883) initiates the view of Emerson as poet after his death. Other important writings on Emerson as a poet include: Elizabeth Luther Cary, *Emerson, Poet and Thinker* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904). Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Emerson as Poet* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972). The philosophical study on Emerson begins with Stanley Cavell, who in his books and essays regards Emerson as a philosopher. He dismisses “the most widely shared, fixated critical gesture toward Emerson... namely the gesture of denying to Emerson the title of philosopher” (“Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience’,” in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Living Batch Press, 1989), 77–78. Other philosophical interpretations of Emerson include David Can Leer, *Emerson’s Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), etc.

upon Emerson), largely miss the peculiar merits and significance of his works. For Emerson was neither a critical philosopher nor an idealist metaphysician, but an intuitive sage-poet: “In Emerson,” wrote Nietzsche to Overbeck, “we have lost a philosopher.” ... Like his artistic models Montaigne, Pascal, and the Goethe of the *Maximen und Reflexionen*, Emerson was a virtuoso of the *pensée*, in which style and content, symbol and “meaning,” are inseparably conjoined. His meditations are exploratory rather than defining or definitive, and the nonpropositional, revelatory use of language with which Emerson alternately enraptures and ensnares his reader renders inappropriate the conventional task of giving a systematic conspectus of his leading ideas.⁶

I think this is a fair and non-biased judgment of Emerson’s identity as a poet-philosopher, for the categorization of only a philosopher or only a poet would be insufficient to encompass Emerson’s writing practice and his life ambitions. Throughout his whole career, Emerson was haunted by the tension between sensual delight and philosophical illumination, and as a result, he combines in his writings the most beautiful poetic expressions with the very profound philosophical concerns. Understanding Emerson’s dual identity as both a poet and a philosopher requires some knowledge of the two great traditions which have been competitors in the Western world for nearly two millennia: Hebrew-Christian culture and Greek culture. Emerson was brought up in a Christian family, with eight preachers in his family, and he too was trained to be a preacher, deeply rooting Hebrew-Christian culture in his blood; on the other hand, he was fully exposed to the classics in Latin School and at Harvard College, and was therefore well-versed in ancient Greek culture. These two cultures, embedded in different soils, have totally different orientations. One consists primarily of didactic moral teachings appealing to the soul, and the other pursues artistic beauty appealing to sensual satisfaction. Heinrich Heine, for example, was very aware of the huge differences between these two cultures, and made the famous distinction between the Bible and the Greek world: to the Bible he attributes the ascetic, apocalyptic tradition, and to the Greek world he attributes the vigorous realism of contemporary life.⁷ Arbitrary and incomprehensive as it is, yet there is some validity in Heine’s generalization. Matthew Arnold’s extension of it provides us with a simpler and clearer perspective. Arnold succinctly identifies the Hebraic concern with right acting and the Hellenic insistence upon right thinking; or, in other words, the Bible concerns itself exclusively with moral probity, while the Greek delights in the beauty and perfection of the idea.⁸

If we read Emerson’s works with reference to these two dominant cultures in Western history,

⁶ Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. II (London: The Macmillan Company and the Free Press, 1967), 478.

⁷ <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7506-heine-heinrich>, [July 6, 2020].

⁸ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: John Murray, 1869).

we soon find that instead of following any single tradition, Emerson uniquely merges these competing traditions together, and achieves a successful union of Hellenism and Hebraism (in the sense of Heine's and Arnold's distinctions). In this paper I aim to accomplish a justification for Emerson as a poet-philosopher with an elaboration on two sides of his works: the Hellenic tradition of poetic writing and the Hebraic tradition of philosophical thinking.

1. Poetical Writing

The Greek poets have, before writing, an intellectual conception of an "ideal" or a "form" in their mind as the perfect goal of their verse; therefore their writing is like an imitation or approaching resemblance to that "ideal." From Plato's *Symposium* to Aristotle's *Poetics* to the dramatic works of the three great Greek playwrights—Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides—poetic creation is an essential part of their way of social act, and they attach great importance to literary aesthetics (although they didn't have this concept then, I use it here only as an explanation of the literary aspect of their works); in a word, poetry for the Greeks is an art that requires polished language and perfect form.

Emerson familiarized himself with Greek culture during his studies at Latin School and Harvard. Through the work of Baron de Gérando, Emerson got to know the pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Thales, Anaximander, the Pythagoreans, Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Heraclitus. He was especially interested in Plato, whom he discovered, in the English translation, as an undergraduate at Harvard. He considered Plato to be the father of the art of exposition, and his Bowdoin prize essays during this time—"The Character of Socrates" and "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy"—show the influence of Greek culture, especially from Plato and Aristotle.⁹

In fact, long before Emerson became a pastor he had the ambition to become a poet. This was Emerson's longest and most important dream. Emerson began to write poetry when he was only eight years old. During his college years, he was the class poet, and as he grew older, his interest in poetry and poetics increased. He loved poems, read poems, and wrote poems throughout his life. He published three collections of poems and compiled two poetry anthologies. On Christmas Day of 1846, Emerson's first collection, *Poems*, was published, which contains the culmination of Emerson's best poetry from over thirty years. When Emerson was sixty-four years old, his second collection of poems came out, entitled *May-Day and Other Pieces*. In 1876, Emerson, who was in his old age, published his last collection, *Selected Poems*, with the help of his daughter Ellen. In addition, he edited a collection of poems entitled *Parnassus*.

⁹ Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: An Outline of His Philosophical Development through 1836 with Special Emphasis on the Sources and Interpretation of Nature*, vol. 1 (Raleigh: The Thistle Press, 1945), 37–38.

Tellingly, Emerson is a sincere writer. He insists on writing and speaking the things that he thinks for himself, and not the things others designate to him. He declares in his journal, after he resigns from the ministry and turns to lecturing for a living, that “henceforth I design not to utter any speech, poem, or book that is not entirely and peculiarly my work.”¹⁰

In order to convey his authentic as well as original ideas, he has to deviate from the conventional usage of language and invent his own writing style. For Emerson, poetic writing is not only a common inheritance but also an innovation, the birth of which requires a creative spirit that both perceives and expresses poetically. Poetic perception originates from the intuition and inspiration in the mind, and by the power of imagination finally arrives at a vision of the truth. And in the process of transference from vision to words, Emerson employs a poetic expression that blends symbolic language and essay form to create an organic whole with grand ideas.

Emerson raises the question straightforwardly in the essay “Intellect”:

How can we speak of the action of the mind under any divisions, as of its knowledge, of its ethics, of its works, and so forth, since it melts will into perception, knowledge into act? Each becomes the other. Itself alone is. Its vision is not like the vision of the eye, but is union with the things known.¹¹

Poetic perception, or vision, is an important concept for Emerson; it is an ability almost uniquely possessed by the poet. In a journal passage, Emerson refers to poetic perception as the only truth because it is realized “from within”:

Poetry is the only verity. Wordsworth said of his Ode it was poetry, but he did not know it was the only truth. Poet see the stars, because he makes them. Perception makes. We can only see what we make, all our desires are procreant. Perception has a destiny. I notice that all poetry comes, or all becomes poetry, when we look from within and are using all as if the mind made it.¹²

This idealistic view of poetry reflects Emerson’s pursuit of spiritual and inner truth instead of superficial truth. His insistence on the dominance of the subjective mind in such a pursuit leads us back to the traditional debate on ideal and material, subject and object, etc., and on this issue, Emerson chooses the side of idealism: that in the perception of truth, the mind (inner sight) sees

¹⁰ William H. Gilman et al, eds., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols., vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–82), 335. Hereinafter referred to as *JMN*.

¹¹ Alfred R. Ferguson et al, eds., *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1971), 193. Hereinafter referred to as *CW*.

¹² Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 6 vols., vol. 8 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 321. Hereinafter referred to as *J*.

through the material object to its core.

But the problem of the mind is not as simple as the biological faculty of consciousness. In the elaboration of his First Philosophy,¹³ the philosophy of the mind, Emerson follows Coleridge's distinction between Understanding and Reason. Understanding is for discovering the practical truths of this world; Reason is the faculty for perceiving spiritual truth beyond experience. He writes in his Journal in 1833:

The first Philosophy, that of the mind, is the science of what is, in distinction from what appears... Reason, seeing in objects their remote effects, affirms the effect as the permanent character. The Understanding, listening to Reason, on the one side, which says, it is, and to the senses on the other side, which says, it is not, takes middle ground and declares, it will be. Heaven is the projection of the Ideas of Reason on the plane of the Understanding.¹⁴

Hence, what Emerson means by intellectual perception is, to a great extent, the combination of the sensual experience of Understanding and the abstract transcendence of Reason.

Emerson's first published book, *Nature*, is about how man visualizes his world. As Merton Sealts sums it up in his study of Emerson's idea of the scholar: "It is a book about vision, the process of vision, and the uses of vision."¹⁵ Metaphors of sight and seeing both open and close the book. It begins with a "retrospective" we behold God and nature only through the eyes of our forefathers and ends in a forward-looking chapter called "Prospects," which invokes the "wonder" that "the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight"¹⁶. The component chapters are arranged so as to appeal in turn to the senses of the reader (particularly his visual sense), then to Understanding, and ultimately to Reason.

In the essay "The Poet," Emerson states that the poet possesses the "ulterior intellectual perception" that will connect mind and matter. This "ulterior intellectual perception" includes three essential aspects: intuition, inspiration, and imagination. Intuition is the direct and experimental way of accessing truth, contrasted with the metaphysical speculation or religious revelation called tuition. According to Emerson, it is the essence of genius, of virtue and of life. It is the primary wisdom that provides the fountain for all actions and thoughts, and the "lungs of

¹³ Aristotle initiates First Philosophy in his *Metaphysics*, and the exact definition of it is still under bitter controversy. It is generally thought that the First Philosophy is the intellectual pursuit in its highest and grounding function, and in this aspect is identified with science, or knowledge, or scientific knowledge. But it seems that it is Bacon who kindles Emerson's interest in First Philosophy. The first recorded mention is in his notes on Gérando from 1830, where he writes that Bacon's concept of "Prima Philosophia" includes all great philosophical principles that are "true in all science, in morals and in mechanics." In June 1835, Emerson notes, "I have endeavored to announce the laws of the First Philosophy, it is a mark of these that their enunciation awakens the feeling of the moral sublime, and great men are they who believe in them." David Stollar, *The Infinite Soul. Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Vital Years, 1803-1841* (London: St James Publishing, 2000), 180-83.

¹⁴ *J4*: 235-36.

¹⁵ Merton M. Sealts Jr, *Emerson on the Scholar* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 66-67.

¹⁶ *CW1*: 45.

inspiration,” that selective talent that helps the poet to transfer the intuitively perceived truths to settle down in the mind. In the essay “Inspiration,” Emerson explains:

The poet cannot see a natural phenomenon which does not express to him a correspondent fact in his mental experience; he is made aware of a power to carry on and complete the metamorphosis of natural into spiritual facts. Everything which we hear for the first time was expected by the mind; the newest discovery was expected. In the mind we call this enlarged power Inspiration. I believe that nothing great and lasting can be done except by inspiration, by leaning on the secret augury.¹⁷

In the preface to his poetry anthology *Parnassus*, Emerson differentiates between “poets by education and practice” and “poets by nature,” which is also the difference between poets with inspiration and poets without. Imagination is that quality of mind which enables the poet to give form to the truths which he perceives intuitively and is aware of in his mind. In “the Poet” Emerson explains that the poet’s insight expresses itself as “a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees.”¹⁸ He also describes two powers of the imagination: one of knowing the symbolic character of things and treating them as representative, and the other the tenaciousness of an image, grasping it and not letting it go. This naturally leads us to the question of expression and form.

The value of intellectual perception, important as it is to Emerson’s poetic writing, will only be revealed when the truth which it perceives finds expression in recognizable form; in other words, the transference from vision to words—the process of expression—is equally important. Beginning with the smallest unit of expression, the word, Emerson addresses every stage of his composition. The word is of fundamental importance; for Emerson, every word should be the right word. In *Nature* he argues that “words are signs of natural facts,”¹⁹ and since natural facts are symbols of spiritual facts, words have both a concrete existence as things and a spiritual significance as well.²⁰

¹⁷ *CW* 8: 271.

¹⁸ *CW* 3: 26.

¹⁹ *CW* 1: 25.

²⁰ Throughout Emerson’s works there are many references to words as actual things. This concept may owe something to both history and theology. Atkins in *English Literary Criticism* says, “One of the great commonplaces of antiquity had been the power of Logos, of reason as it expresses itself in speech.” (88) He points out the medieval writers had a superstitious reverence for words, such as Roger Bacon’s belief that all miracles had been performed by means of words and that all words in the Bible had manifold powers (*Ibid.*, 132–133). Emerson, of course, was familiar with the discussion of words in Plato’s *Cratylus*. Cameron cites Sampson Reed, who, he believes “had a definite influence upon Emerson’s theory of poetry,” as using the expression “words make one with things.” (*Emerson the Essayist*, I, 278) He also notes that Emerson wrote a sermon in 1831 entitled “Words and Things” (*Ibid.*, 416). In “Inspiration,” Emerson says, “What is best in literature is the affirming, prophesying, spermatic words of men-making poets” (*CW* 8: 294). In “Poetry and Imagination,” he declares, “It cost the early bard little talent to chant more impressively than the later, more cultivated poets. His advantage is that his words are things.” (*CW* 8: 57)

This characteristic of the word inevitably ensures the use of a symbolic language. Emerson believes that the writer's principal power is the effective use of figures of speech, namely, the symbol. So deep and far-reaching, indeed, is his devotion that there is hardly anything of good repute connected with writing that is not intimately associated with the symbol. Reason, the noble mental faculty, embodies its reflections emblematically. Imagination is the power to symbolize. The man of genius is such because of his control of the symbol. Poetry presupposes the trope.²¹ In "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson asserts:

A good symbol is the best argument, and is a missionary to persuade thousands. The Vedas, the Edda, the Koran are each remembered by their happiest figures. There is no more welcome gift to men than a new symbol. That satiates, transports, converts them. They assimilate themselves to it, deal with it in all ways, and it will last a hundred years.²²

Emerson himself says all that really needs to be said about how to read his best essays and what their value for us is: his imaginative mind and his use of images and symbols, for the use of a symbol is a sort of evidence that your thought is just.

This poetic meticulousness of Emerson extends from the level of language to the level of form. Emerson uses various writing forms during his lifetime, the most often used and significant being the essay. His essays are not logical or philosophical treatises and it is surprising that Emerson should choose the essay form, considering the fact that few of his poet or philosopher contemporaries ever used such a form. The original meaning of the word "essay" is to try, to endeavor, to attempt something. Emerson himself, I believe, starts his essayist career with such an understanding. Having once declared "I shall essay to be," Emerson sees the essay as a way of "essaying" to create himself in the very process, in the very act, of setting words on paper or uttering them aloud. As he says in "The Poet": "the man is only half himself, the other half is his expression."²³

But the casual and seemingly contradictory expression contained in an essay form causes much dissatisfaction among Emerson's readers. They accuse his ideas of being inconsistent and unsystematic. In his response to criticism of his seemingly casual form (or formlessness), Emerson justifies his choice:

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and

²¹ Grant Suttcliffe, *Emerson's Theories of Literary Expression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1918), 17.

²² *CW* 5: 13-14.

²³ *CW* 3: 4.

philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day.—“Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.”—Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.²⁴

Emerson's world refuses to be analyzed by addition and subtraction, nor by detachment, nor by aggregation. His works maintain the integrity of the intellect transmitted to words.

There is no doubt that Emerson is indeed a poet, whether in the usual sense of the word or in the special sense that he himself attributes to the “poet” (the former implying the composition of poems with rhythm and rhyme, and the latter implying a broad sense of poetry, including essays, lectures, speeches, etc.). In the usual sense, Emerson began writing poems in his youth and continued to write poems all through his life. In the sense of his own definition of the “poet,” he perceives nature with poetical eyes, trusts his inspiration, intuition, and imagination, and expresses his thoughts with symbolic language and organic form.

2. Philosophical Thinking

In contrast to the Greek poets, Hebrew-Christian poetry fills itself with holy messages. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach compares the narrative of the Bible and the Homeric epic, concluding that whereas Homer's narrative is vivid and believable, Biblical narrative is mystical and allusive, and always alludes to some unchangeable laws. In the context of Hebrew Christianity, that law is the moral duty of man. With this stern demand for moral integrity, it is natural that the literariness of the Biblical literatures is not important (though there are many literary genres), but the function and purpose of it is to admonish people to follow the right path to God, to behave and act according to God's will, and to distinguish between good and evil and to choose good. These are a man's primary duties in the world.

Early America was dominated by Puritanism, the doctrine which suppresses human nature as sinful and depraved. But by the close of the eighteenth century, a new form of Christianity had emerged: a faith more in keeping with new political and social expectations which rejected the puritanical view of human nature as degrading. God was seen as a reasonable and loving Father

²⁴ *CW* 2: 33–34.

rather than a stern tyrant of incomprehensible decree. Man was considered a moral agent, free to fashion his own destiny, rather than being subject to unalterable predestination. V. L. Parrington remarks in the second volume of *Main Currents in American Thought: The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860*:

Unitarianism... reversed the thought processes of Calvinism. Instead of debasing man to a mean creature, subject to a God of wrath, it professed to discover a loving father in the human heart of love. Here was a revolution in which were the seeds of transcendentalism, of social Utopias, of pretty much the entire intellectual awakening of New England.²⁵

Emerson was born into this age: he was raised in a Unitarian family, educated in a Unitarian environment, and trained to be a Unitarian preacher. Emerson's knowledge of Christian traditions was doubtlessly comprehensive. While he is a poet in writing, he is also a philosopher in thinking. In all his life and writings, Man, the centrality of Man, is always his foremost concern. Revolving around this concern, there are two main ideas: the first is that of a just law upholding a harmonious universe, which he calls the Moral Law; the second is a principle in each human being which intuits this Moral Law, enabling the individual to act in harmony with it, which Emerson calls the Moral Nature or the Soul. All in all, Man is his starting point of thinking; Man connects the Moral Law and the Moral Nature. As Milton R. Konvitz writes in the "Introduction" to *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*:

Emerson's thought starts and ends with the centrality of man, and from this center he developed his ontological, epistemological, religious, and moral insights. The world, he said, "becomes at last only a realized will—the double of the man." (*CW* 1: 46) This world contains all of man's industry, poetry, religion—all of man's work, hopes and frustrations. Man, once born, has no way to avoid his opportunity of making himself and his world, no way of avoiding his responsibility for what he thinks, does, makes, suffers and enjoys. The visible world is only the end product of his spirit, the metaphor, as Emerson liked to say, of the human mind.²⁶

Therefore, a discussion of the origins and development of Emerson's ideas requires a philosophical interpretation of his writings, for the problem that he considers for his whole life is philosophical in

²⁵ Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800—1860* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 326.

²⁶ Konvitz and Whicher, eds., *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 11.

nature, and the methods and terms he uses to present it are also fundamentally philosophical.

First of all, Emerson's belief in the "Moral law" (or "Moral Sense") is the basis of his faith in Man or humanity. In the Unitarian tradition Emerson is taught to see the universe as governed by goodness and life as a school of character. He also finds ideas asserting the dignity of man and proposing that, through Reason, man is made in the "moral image" of God. In addition, under the influence of Dugald Stewart and Richard Price, Emerson holds man's ability to make moral judgments to be both innate and universal.²⁷ In a journal entry from 1823, he records the depth of his commitment to the idea that Man is innately equipped with the faculty of judging right from wrong. For Emerson, the implications of this fact are enormous:

It is in the constitution of the mind to rely with firmer confidence upon the moral principle, and I reject at once the idea of a delusion in this. This is woven vitally into the thinking substance itself so that it cannot be diminished or destroyed without dissipating forever that spirit which it inhabited. Upon the foundation of my moral sense, I ground my faith in the immortality of the soul, in the existence & activity of good beings, and in the promise of rewards accommodated hereafter to the vicious or virtuous dispositions which were cultivated here.²⁸

As this passage reveals, Emerson holds the mind to be inescapably moral, moral in its very essence. The act of perception itself, as a product of the mind a part of a moral universe a moral principle, is an act of moral discrimination.

Accordingly, the poet with this moral mind "must let Humanity sit with the Muse in his head, as the charioteer sits with the hero in the Iliad,"²⁹ and "all writings, must be in a degree exoteric, written to a human should or would, instead of to the fatal is."³⁰ This moral duty for the poet and poetry comes down from the Puritanical-Unitarian tradition and is especially prevailing among Emerson's contemporaries.³¹

²⁷ David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 51. Both Dugald Stewart's and Richard Price's moral philosophies exert influence on Emerson. Stephen Whicher argues that Stewart was the major influence on Emerson in this regard, but Porte finds that Price was the more significant. See Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 69.

²⁸ *JMN* 2: 83.

²⁹ *CW* 8: 66.

³⁰ *CW* 30-31.

³¹ In the cultural context of Puritanism and Unitarianism, literature plays a social function. It is a kind of instrument for conveying religious moral sentiments and improves social cohesion. Jones Very, in his 1838 essay "Epic Poetry," assumed that obligation to be the artist's as he identified, in a prescient way, the turning of literary attention from outward experience to the moral battles in the interior mind. Sampson Reed formulated the coda of an age which linked poetry's moral purpose, its preoccupation with nature imagery, and its assumption of a divine ontology.

In 1829 Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian preacher for the Second Church, in Boston. Keeping his eye on the centrality of Man and his power to become a creature made in the image of God, Emerson is naturally led to devalue the past and tradition, and to emphasize instead the duty and the right of each man to trust himself. Emerson makes his sense of this task clear in a sermon on his last day as minister at the Second Church: “It is thought that juster views of human nature are gaining ground than have yet prevailed. Men are beginning to see with more distinctness what they ought to be.” It is the duty of the age, therefore, to continue “the higher and holier work of forming men, true and entire men.”³²

But the ministry, with its clinging to old forms and traditions, disturbs Emerson’s natural conscience. He confides to his journal that “in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers.”³³ What he means here by “good minister” is no longer a religious minister, but a teacher who communicates spiritual truth to people. He laments that nobody in the ministry teaches what he calls “the heart of Christianity.” For him, it is the doctrine of “man’s moral nature.” He writes on the ship to Europe, after his resignation, that the problem with contemporary religions is their narrowness and shallowness, because they are taught by incapable teachers. These men

do not know the extent or the harmony or the depth of their moral nature; that they are clinging to little, positive, verbal, formal versions of the moral law, & very imperfect versions too, while the infinite laws, the laws of the Law, the great circling truths whose only adequate symbol is the material laws, the astronomy, etc., are all unobserved, & sneered at when spoken of, as frigid & insufficient.³⁴

Hence, what religion needs is a true teacher who can show people how “the sublimity & depth of the Original is penetrated & exhibited to men”³⁵. By “the Original” Emerson refers to the spiritual basis of Man’s moral constitution.

In Emerson’s view, the new teacher would tell the truth about Man: that Man is guided by a moral law, which is a faculty that insures other qualities in Man:

A man contains all that is needful to his government within himself. He is made a law unto himself. All real good or evil that can befall him must be from himself. He only can do

³² Arthur Cushman McGiffert Jr., ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Young Emerson Speaks: Unpublished Discourses on Many Subjects* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1938), 180. Hereinafter referred to as *YES*.

³³ *JMN* 4: 27.

³⁴ *JMN* 4: 83.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

himself any good or any harm. Nothing can be given to him or taken from him but always there is a compensation. There is a correspondence between the human soul & everything that exists in the world,—more properly, everything that is known to man. Instead of studying things without the principles of them, all may be penetrated unto within him. Every act puts the agent in a new condition. The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself. He is not to live to the future as described to him but to live to the real future by living to the real present. The highest revelation is that God is in every man.³⁶

The objective of such a teacher is “the study & explanation of the moral constitution of man.”³⁷ Here we come to the essence of Emerson’s “First philosophy,” namely, the moral sentiment of man.

In setting down what he means by “the moral law of human nature” he had previously remarked that “to acquaint a man with himself” seems to be the very purpose of life itself. In a sermon he equates living with the continuously active process of learning:

The end of living is to know; and, if you say, the end of knowledge is action,—why, yes, but the end of that action again, is knowledge... The sun grudges his light, and the air his breath to him who stands with his hands folded in this great school of God, and does not perceive that all are students, all are learning the art of life, the discipline of virtue, how to act, how to suffer, how to be useful, and what their Maker designed them for.³⁸

Emerson’s thinking on Man and Man’s moral nature begins from this ministry experience, and flourishes in his literary career. After he resigns from the pulpit in 1832, lecturing becomes Emerson’s primary occupation, and he decides to devote his life to an open search for the secret of Man, and for the truth, goodness, and beauty in the world. In 1833 and 1834 he delivered lectures on natural history; in 1835, he delivered a series of lectures on “Biography,” and then on English Literature; during the same time he also delivered a “Historic Discourse” at Concord and several other addresses and sermons. In these, he appeals to nature for the validity of the moral law in the universe and the moral soul in the individual; he references lives of great men (or history) to demonstrate the great potentials and moral strength of these historical figures; and he presents literature as a vehicle to convey moral truth from nature to the common man.

In his first lecture series on natural history, Emerson uses his recent visit to the Jardin des

³⁶ *JMN* 4: 84.

³⁷ *JMN* 4: 83, 93–94.

³⁸ *YES* 192–3.

Plantes in Paris to illustrate the progress of science and to convey his own sense of the larger implications of scientific studies. After first considering their immediately practical values, he argues that the “greatest office” of science is more than utilitarian; it is “to explain man to himself.” Science for Emerson is clearly instrumental; his ultimate concern is with what he has called “the moral constitution of man”; scientific knowledge will help to “give man his true place in the system of being.” The key to interpretation is the Emersonian vision that “the whole of Nature is a metaphor or image of the human Mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass.”³⁹ The moral law, he has written, is symbolized in material laws just as nature itself is “a metaphor or image of the human Mind.” The study of nature and natural laws can therefore be a way of apprehending spiritual laws.

Emerson also inquires into the moral character of history; he is committed to the proposition that “history taken together is as severely moral in its teaching as the strictest religious sect,”⁴⁰ but he also realizes the moral limitations which history reveals in even the greatest persons. In an 1834 journal entry, he asks, “What is it that interests us in Biography?” Great figures of history interest us because of the “silent comparison between the intellectual & moral endowments portrayed & those of which we are conscious.”⁴¹ And again, in January 1835, he writes: “The great value of Biography consists in the perfect sympathy that exists between like minds. Space & time are an absolute nullity to this principle.”⁴² It is not the great man himself, therefore, who makes history moral, but rather the idea he embodies: “Each fine genius that appears is already predicted in our constitution inasmuch as he only makes apparent shades of thought in us of which we hitherto knew not (or actualizes an idea).”⁴³ The intention was partially realized in the 1835 lecture series on “Biography,” and was repeated later, with a sharper definition of the central theme of Man, in the lectures on “Representative Men.” Emerson wrote on Milton:

Better than any other man, he has discharged the office of every great man, namely, to raise the idea of Man in the minds of his contemporaries and of posterity,—to draw after nature a life of man, exhibiting such a composition of grace, of strength, and of virtue, as poet had not described nor hero lived. Human nature in these ages is indebted to him for its best portrait.⁴⁴

³⁹ Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, eds., *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1959–72), 23–24, 290. Hereinafter referred to as *EL*.

⁴⁰ *JMN* 5: 12.

⁴¹ *J* 4: 256.

⁴² *JMN* 5: 11.

⁴³ *JMN* 4: 353.

⁴⁴ *EL* 1: 149.

History is, for Emerson, essentially the process of a mind expressing itself in human action, whereas literature is the process of a mind expressing itself in literary form. History, in this sense, is the macrocosmic expression of mind, while literature is its microcosmic expression.

The moral aspiration that accounts for the qualities of greatness Emerson finds in historical figures also account, in his judgment, for the creation of great literature. In one sense, the creative act itself is moral, whether it took form as literature or as another art form. In the ten early lectures on English literature, Emerson sets forth a transcendental theory of literature that gives highest value to “the majestic ideas of God, of Justice, of Freedom, of Necessity, of War, and of intellectual Beauty,” as well as of Virtue and Love. Again in “Ethical Writers” Emerson asserts that “the law which Ethics treats is what we mean by the nature of things.”⁴⁵

From then on, he continued lecturing and writing essays (*Essays: First Series, Essays: Second Series, Poems, The Conduct of Life, Society and Solitude, Letters and Social Aims, Parnassus*, etc.), but the central theme remained the same: Man or humanity is the center of his thinking.⁴⁶ Emerson’s deepest excursions thus far into nature, history or lives of great men, and literature remain moral investigations, whose results are measured by the light they shed on man.

3. Conclusion: A Poetical Philosopher

Though Heine’s and Matthew Arnold’s distinction between “Hebraism and Hellenism” is only a general statement, and though Emerson himself insists on being regarded as a poet and not a philosopher,⁴⁷ we should remember that in the earlier years Emerson abolished the distinction between the philosopher and the poet, saying that the poet is a philosopher, and the philosopher a poet:

Whilst thus the poet animates nature with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosophy only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought. “The problem of philosophy,” according to Plato, “is, for all that exists conditionally, to find a ground unconditioned and absolute.” It proceeds on the faith that a law determines all phenomena, which being known, the phenomena can be predicted. That law,

⁴⁵ *EL* 2: 203.

⁴⁶ On his thinking on Man, Emerson’s thought develops and changes in his middle years. The decisive turning point is the early 1840s and the turn from freedom to fate, as Stephen Whicher pointed out, and which was widely accepted. But this change does not affect Emerson’s understanding of Man or humanity. Rather, it affects the overtly philosophical method by which the individual can apprehend nature and the world.

⁴⁷ In his letter to Lydia, Emerson says that “I am born a poet—of a low class without doubt, but a poet. That is my nature and vocation. My singing, to be sure, is very husky and is for the most part in prose. Still I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonious that are in the soul and in matter, and specially of the correspondence between them.” *J* 1: 435.

when in the mind, is an idea. Its beauty is infinite. The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both.⁴⁸

Emerson cares about the “design” (the form), as well as “the grand design” (the ideas), for “great thoughts ensure musical expressions,” as he declares in the preface to his poetry anthology *Parnassus*:

Poetry teaches the enormous force of a few words, and, in proportion to the inspiration, checks loquacity. It requires that splendor of expression which carries with it the proof of great thoughts. Great thoughts insure musical expressions. Every word should be the right word. The poets are they who see that spiritual is greater than any material force, that thoughts rule the world.⁴⁹

In Emerson’s words, “The manner of using language is surely the most decisive test of intellectual power”⁵⁰. For a true poet, he writes,

must not only converse with pure thought, but he must demonstrate it almost to the senses. His words must be pictures: his verses must be spheres and cubes, to be seen and handled. His fable must be a good story, and its meaning must hold as pure truth.⁵¹

He does not discount the importance of recognizable form, for it is the link between the poet’s mind and the minds of men. He writes in “The Poet”:

The argument is secondary, the finish of the verse is primary. For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.⁵²

Here, the idea in the poem must be so completely fused with the way the idea is expressed, that the two appear to be one. In addition, Emerson maintains that a poem is “a thought so passionate and

⁴⁸ *CW* 1: 59.

⁴⁹ Edward Wagenknecht, “Appendix B: Emerson’s Preface to Parnassus,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Portrait of a Balanced Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 241–45.

⁵⁰ *J* 2: 449.

⁵¹ Wagenknecht, “Appendix B: Emerson’s Preface to Parnassus,” 247.

⁵² *CW* 3: 9–10.

alive that like the spirit of a plant or animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.” The poetry, then, has its own individual unity; it is organic in the form. Each thought, appealing as they may be separately, must ultimately be made subservient to an eternal truth, which may be expressed only by the welding of thought and form into an organic whole. This organic wholeness finds its expression in “Poetry and Imagination”:

In Poetry we say we require the miracle. The bee flies among the flowers, and gets mint and marjoram, and generates a new product, which is not mint and marjoram, but honey; the chemist mixes hydrogen and oxygen to yield a new product, which is not these, but water; and the poet listens to conversation and beholds all objects in Nature, to give back, not them, but a new and transcendent whole.⁵³

Emerson’s writings in fact reflect the complementary nature of philosophical and poetical discourse. His vision is of the unity of the philosopher and the poet, and the return of philosophy to its home in the poetic use of language. In *Symbolism and American Literature*, Charles Feidelson rightly maintains that the ultimate aim of Emerson’s work is “to force a revision in philosophy that would justify and encourage literature, while at the same time it proposed the poetic outlook as a corrective to traditional metaphysics and epistemology.”⁵⁴ For Emerson, this poetic vision of thinking about philosophical questions would truly fuse together poetry and philosophy, making the best of their individual advantages and offsetting their defects, just as Julian Hawthorne asserts: “Emerson the poet is Emerson the philosopher transfigured. Here his strength is at its maximum, and his weakness seldom appears.”⁵⁵

Commenting on Emerson’s poetry, Albert J. Von Frank observes that “what makes Emerson’s

⁵³ *CW* 8: 16–17. Emerson found the concept of organic unity expressed in Plato. This passage, originally used in a lecture on “The Poet” in 1841, echoes the *Ion* in which Plato says that the lyric poets “tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way from flower to flower.” (*The Dialogue of Plato*, vol. i, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, 502.) Also, in Atkins’ *Literary Criticism in Antiquity* he says that “among the outstanding principles of art revealed in his (Plato’s) writings none is however more illuminating than that principle of organic unity which he regarded as one of the primary conditions of art. The most familiar of his pronouncements on this point occurs in the *Phaedrus*, where he states that ‘every discourse... ought to be constructed like a living creature, having a body of its own as well as a head and feet, and with a middle and extremities also in perfect keeping with one another and the whole.’ (I 54–55) And here, it will be noticed, he requires not only the unity or completeness that is provided by a suitable beginning, middle, and end, but also a unity that is vital in kind, all the parts being related as the parts of a living organism, so that nothing could be changed or omitted without injury to the whole. See J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity: A Sketch of Its Development* (London: Methuen, 1952).

⁵⁴ Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 121.

⁵⁵ Hawthorne and Leonard Lemmon, *American Literature: A Text-Book for the Use of Schools and Colleges* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1891), 128.

s innovative view of the function of poetry so entirely distinctive and so consequential is his belief that poetry and philosophy comprise in fact a single pursuit.”⁵⁶ For Emerson, poetry and philosophy are just two employing instruments, not constraining structures, the end of both being the truth of man. His genius is both poetic power and philosophical profundity, literary and ethical. Through the aesthetic delicacies, especially imagination, he expresses his tradition-loaded moral insights. As a poet and moralist, he presents beauty (aesthetic pursuits) and truth (moral commitment) for all men’s edification and delight.

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⁵⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Major Poetry*, ed. Albert J. Von Frank (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University), xi.

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摘要:美国19世纪作家爱默生身兼数种身份:他既是一名演讲家、随笔作家、思想家、诗人,早期还曾经是一名传教士。想要明确界定爱默生的归属既不可能也无必要,因为他的写作糅合了多种风格。熟稔希腊文化和基督教文化的爱默生,在他的写作中既采用了希腊式的写作风格,即诗性的感知、表达和形式,诗性的感知需要调动诗人的直觉、灵感和想象,诗意的表达需要借助象征的语言和随笔类不拘的形式,形成有机的整体。同时,爱默生又以基督教的传统为内容基调,即重视哲思和道德说教,他相信宇宙间存在一种“道德法则”,维持着宇宙的和谐;个体也具有天生的道德本性和心灵。这篇论文重点分析爱默生文章中的这两种特性,并在此基础上提出,这两者在爱默生的写作中并不互相冲突,相反,两者互为补充,诗性的写作风格在情感维度增加了文章的感染力;而哲性的思考在理性维度保证了文章的深刻。从这个意义上而言,爱默生可被称为诗性哲学家。

关键词:爱默生;诗性写作;哲性思考;诗性哲学家

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