

**THE TRANSCENDENTALIST PREDICAMENT :  
A STUDY IN EMERSONS' AND THOREAU'S  
PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY WRITINGS**

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Somewhere else (1), I have pointed out that the underlying or latent structure of the capitalist view of man is characterized by a polarity, not a dialectical unity, between two opposites : a belief in limitless freedom combined with a surrender to total determinism. Man is seen as completely free, yet he is also seen as a part of a structure he can neither comprehend nor control. Even though the idea of individual freedom is essential to liberal, bourgeois politics and economics, the idea of conscious, human planning is alien to them. In other words, it is a view of man that implies freedom, not control or limits ; but since there is no freedom without control or limits, we end up with the polarity of solipsism (or complete individual freedom) versus determinism (or the lack of any control that can be achieved only through the knowledge of laws and limits).

I have also traced the same latent structure in Zionist ideology (2), which asserts the absolute right of any Jew to go back to the Promised Land anytime he so wishes, yet it simultaneously assumes that all Jews will end up there, whether they want it or not. The Land has certain irresistible magnetism that turns all Jews into wandering, alienated exiles, living in the land of the «goyim». In other words, Zionism sees the Jew as an exile, existing outside time and space, who has certain absolute rights (complete freedom), yet he is doomed to remain an alien destined to go back to the land (complete predestination). Horace Mayer Kallen, leading pragmatic philosopher and an American Zionist, said that the main two attributes of Nature are freedom and chance (3), that is freedom divorced from control, or the idea of law.

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Wordsworth, it seems, was aware of this polarity, for he makes his «children» limifless and lawless, yet dominated by nature. In «Tintern Abbey», the child and the «thoughtless youth» live in a free, natural world, yet they are always led by something external to them. Hence they enter in a «filial» relationship with nature ; whereas the adult, disciplined and limited by social values, enters in a «spousal» relationship, a dialectical, fruitful relationship between two equals who enrich and diversify each other ; a relationship that limits even as it liberates, and that liberates even as it limits.

Many of the characters in Hawthorne's tales and stories meet with a disasterous end because they cannot resolve the polarity of the capitalist veiw of man, as I point out in my study of «Rappaccini's Daughter» (4). They keep on shuttling between paradisiac innocence and freedom on the one hand, and infernal surrender to determinism, on the other.

But a polarity, qua polarity, leads nowhere and results in mere irresolution. The reader of modern Western literature will undoubtedly notice that many characters land in a complete deadlock (kafka's K, Eliot's «Hollow Men», Becket's alienated characters, Weiss's Marquise, etc.). All of them are, more or less, free, but they have no control on the world they live in. For that reason they fail to make use of their freedom in any significant way. In this respect, they are very much like the capitalist in his relationship with the market ; he moves quite freely in it, but he has no control whatsoever over it, and, therefore, his movement is a mere process without any purpose. Marx summed it all up when he said of the capitalist that he should expand or die, that is, he is free to expand ; he must expand ; indeed, he is doomed to expand, or he would shrink and die. But the expansion is by definition purposeless end futile because it leads nowhere and would never stop.

If we want to draw further structural analogies, we can point to expansionist Israel as a good example of the polarity leading to endless, fruitless, process. Israel keeps on expanding yet fails to do anything with its victories ! That is why I wrote once (5) suggesting that we use the term *intshar* (expansion) rather than *intsar* (victory) to describe Israeli «victories», because these victories result in nothing but the preparation for the «next round» (mere irresolution). Here we find another example of self-dostroying freedom, a freedom that eats itself up, because it is a limitless freedom that has no boundaries, or, at best, has fictive, mythical, idealistic, and impossible boundaries like those of the Zionist state. Chance, far from strengthening freedom, cancels it out altogether.

American Transcendentalism, like the capitalist view of man and Zionist ideology, issues forth from an extreme idealistic, subjectivistic position. It is rooted into a variety of idealisms : «neo-Platonism, German idealist philosophy, and certain Eastern mystical writings» (6). It was German thought, however, that played an important role in shaping the Transcendentalist philosophical imagination. Implanted in a Puritan soil, which was also socially and historically thin to an extraordinary degree, the inherent polarities of German thought were intensified. Hegel, who pushed Germanic philosophy to an idealistic extreme by seeing all reality as simply a manifestation of the Absolute Idea, has rich historical and social reality encircling and checking his thought. That is why the Idea in his writings takes on all kinds of specific historical and social forms. The historical and social density of England could reduce the polarity of a post-kantian Coleridge and stop him from a grotesque shuttling between mere matter and pure mind.

With no compelling historical and social barriers, however, American Transcendentalism could go to the philosophical idealistic extreme of assuming that «man is the spiritual center of the universe and that in man alone can we find the clue to nature, history, and ultimately the cosmos itself» (7). As Emerson put it, «the individual is the universe» (8) or as a contemporary of the Transcendentalists asserted : the doctrine of Transcendentalism is «the substantive, independent existence of the soul of man» (9).

Transcendentalist writings celebrate the individuality of man and the absolute freedom of the self. In the very first paragraph of *Nature*, Emerson asks : «Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?» (10). Thoreau, in the beautiful concluding chapter of *Walden* states : «If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me». (11) The soul of man was both the beginning and the end, or rather the beginning that had no end. Their age was surely «retrospective» (12).

With such retrospective tendencies, the Transcendentalists did not have much use for history. Is it not, after all, some form of limitation? They enthusiastically advocated a kind of human existence completely unrelated to history. Emerson looked at antiquity, only to find it «ridiculous» (13), and therefore he became a perpetual experimenter, «an endless seeker with no past at his back» (14).

Thoreau decided to walk away from (historical) Europe toward (natural) Oregon (15). A sense of the importance of tradition as an ordering and organizing principle was completely lost on them. Thoreau believed that once the self was free from history, it would shed the tameness of literature (or limited structure) and embrace the wildness of natural man. (16).

But the peculiar thing about such an extreme idealistic, antihistorical position is that it uniformly leads to an extremely collectivistic, deterministic viewpoint. Thoreau, for instance, discovered, after having supposedly freed himself completely from history, that nature had a «subtle *magnetism* ... which will direct us right if we unconsciously yield to it» (17) (notice the determinism implicit in the emphasized words, and the invitation to give up human consciousness). But once man becomes part of limitless nature (which is another name for the Non-Me), he turns into an undifferentiated, generalized, abstract category that has neither a specific form nor a recognizable content. The Transcendentalists saw man against «a radically universalized» perspective (18), and as a creature governed by a general law external to him, of which he has no knowledge and over which he has no control. The Universe», Emerson asserted in *Nature*, «is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. Our globe seen by God is a *transparent law* not a mass of facts. The law dissolves the fact and holds it fluid» (19). Even the different laws of each specific culture are dissolved. Only «the Unattainable, the flying Perfect» (20), are of permanent significance.

In such a pantheistic scheme of things, identity is not really important — partial evil is universal good. One man's justice is another's injustice (21), and his sufferings, seen from the perspective of God, Nature, or the Over-Soul, are just part of the «transparent law» and therefore not quite real.

A world in which there is no specific identity is a world that has no ceiling or boundaries and in which everything merges with everything else. Men lose their individuality and this leads to the rise of the representative man, who is not a distinct individual, because he represents «a way of thinking and acting» (22) — an immutable essence rather than a complex and specific historical entity. Man is not seen as a European man or even a nineteenth-century person, he is turned into an allegorical abstraction sometimes called «Man Thinking» (23).

In his Pantheon of thinking, representative men, Emerson lumps together Goethe, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, and Plato. But in Emerson's world where limitless freedom is the *sumum bonum* «the only sin

is limitation» (24). and since all of these «Representative Men» are human, they are found mere limited sinners. Only one man, who is not exactly a man, since he partakes of the infinitude of the Father, is found perfect (25). Yet even He is not spared Emerson's strictures. The Transcendentalist critic went around slandering Christ in private. He told Whitman that «Jesus lacked humor ... and a man who lacks humor is likely to concentrate on one idea» (26). When Emerson selected Christ as the one perfect man, he did so because he was a gentleman who felt the need to stop arbitrarily the process of searching for this one perfect man at a certain point. Emerson the philosopher could never have stopped because for him only the Over-Soul is enough, and the Over-Soul is unattainable, indeed unapproachable (somewhat like the famous Zionist borders extending from the Nile to the Euphrates). Hence Emerson gets caught up in an endless fruitless search — always expanding, never reaching the goal !

Man is, then, abstracted, dehistoricized, allegorized, and submerged in a supra-human transcendent entity. The historical process itself is also allegorized, for it is seen as an embodiment of an Over-Soul that inexorably expresses itself through different men and cultures who are its passive agents and its helpless mediums.

So what we have here is a polarity similar to the one we traced in the capitalist view of man, in «Rappaccini's Daughter», and in Zionist ideology, that is, solipsism combined with determinism. Thoreau literally dropped out of civilization and history and went to Walden to discover himself and to explore his «own higher latitudes». But he also spent a great deal of time just recording natural data, rather too meticulously. No wonder that the secretary of the Association of the Advancement of Science wrote him in 1853 asking what branch of science Thoreau was especially interested in (27). Although Thoreau's angry burst in his own journals was somewhat justified, the secretary's prosaic request had some basis in Thoreau's own writing. Thoreau himself had earlier noticed that the naturalistic, empirical aspect of his mind, the aspect which saw only fragments, was overpowering him. In an 1851 Journal entry he wrote :

I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming distinct and scientific ; that, in exchange for views as wide as heaven's cope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope. I see details, not wholes, nor the shadow of a whole. (28)

In the very year he received the secretary's letter he wrote down that he felt that he was becoming a mere naturalist, «dissipated by so many observations». He then urged himself «to be the magnet in the midst of all this dust and filings». In other words, Thoreau the mere naturalist and passive recorder of natural data, was not a mere figment of the secretary's prosaic imagination. The polarity of complete subjectivity and total surrender to mere nature (the Non-Me) was quite conspicuous in his writings.

In the realm of Transcendental critical theory one can notice the existence of the same polarity. Man finds «*Within himself ... a standard (for beauty) higher than anything yet produced,*» a common, universal, natural standard, which all men possess» (29). In other words, we shuttle from the solipsism of the standard within to the collective determinism of the common, natural standard which all men possess, as if it were a scientific rule.

Multiple difficulties and curiosities result from such a polarized conception of beauty. One such curiosity is Emerson's «climbing scale of culture» which begins in the fragmented and detailed and ends in «the ineffable mysteries of the intellect» (30). Poets should climb the scale to take their directions from «celestial life»(31), leaving the concrete world behind them. Their function is no longer to reshape matter to generate structured meaning, but rather to free matter and make it «flow» (32), so that it may conform to the celestial Eternal Idea of Beauty. All poetry, let us remember, is a mere anti-historical abstraction that «was written before time was» (33), and the poet is just a mere medium. This medium-poet, however, when closely examined, turns out to be a solipsist because he makes the objects he looks at «exponents of his new thought» (34), which is nothing but the collective eternal ideal. In other words, the specific continually resolves itself in the general and abstract, even as the general and abstract continually resolve themselves in the specific. It is not an enriching reciprocity, because a final, or even provisional, resolution is never reached, since such a resolution lies outside time and space. We get lost in the very process of continuous resolution, which is a form of irresolution, an expansion without direction, or a freedom without control.

But the poet, whether as a medium or a demi-god, is always outside limits and historical boundaries. When asked about his views of the works of a certain lyricist, Emerson described him as «plainly a contemporary, not an eternal man», and then added that the said lyricist «did not stand out of our low limitations» (35).

But a form without boundaries, just as freedom without limits, is a contradiction in terms and, after all, since the time of Pythagoras, a semi-mythical figure himself, no one has ever heard the music of the spheres. Emerson, a confused Faustus who sometimes chose to be a gentleman, was quite aware of the contradiction : «I look in vain for the poet whom I describe» (36). And then he added, «when we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical» (37). They were shackled, one must infer, by the incidents of mere time and place. The Transcendentalist critic ends up entrapped in a mere process — the «vain search» for the ideal poet ; a search conducted with the full knowledge that it is doomed to failure. Limitless freedom once more eating itself up, giving man the promise of an ideal paradise, yet landing him in the hell of the absurd.

If the function of the Transcendentalist writer is to «penetrate into the (ahistorical) region where the air is music» (38), mere literary kinds, which are the product of specific historical and literary processes, become mere impediments to Transcendental expression. Therefore Emerson and the Transcendentalists did away with all literary genres. I have done considerable research to ascertain Emerson's views on the sonnet, the ode, or the epic ; they are nowhere to be found. All that we have are such glib statements as the following : «A rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a sea shell ... The pairing of the birds is an idyl, not tedious as our idyls are ; a tempest is a rough ode, without falsehood or rant; a summer, with its harvest sown, reaped and stored, is an epic song» (39). Margaret Fuller quotes many of Wordsworth's poems without ever discussing their genres. Her article on Goethe sees him as a great «genius» and she discusses *Faust* not as a drama (a specific genre) but as an embodiment of the «one great poetic idea possible to man ... the progress of a soul through the various forms of existence» (40).

The genres of Transcendentalist literature and American literature contemporaneous with it are indeed for the most part quite hard to define. The over-soul genre is of course the journal and notebook where the soul, alone with itself and unshackled by any historical social or artistic barriers, gushes forth its joys and sorrows. The journals or the notebooks are flashes of insight and records of moments of revelation which do not conform to any very obvious conventions or decorum or require any rigorous well-defined structure. Emerson begged Minerva for continuity, forgetting that he should have asked Clio. His essays are fascinatingly unique creations that could be seen only as mythical structures. Thoreau's *Walden*, another outgrowth of the

journal and notebooks, is nearly *sui generis* and cannot be traced back to any recognizable literary genre. It is a strange melange of short fables, lyrical outbursts, personal episodes, oriental meditations, pure natural descriptions that verge on mere cataloguing, downright scientific reporting, and several other structured, and not so structured, passages. In other words, the Transcendentalist literary theoretician and writer, seeking complete freedom, reject literary genres as too narrow and limiting, yet they end up with fragments and with the most constricted, most immediate, and most fragmented literary kind, the diary. The writer quite often degenerates into mere cataloguing and scientific reporting. Once more we can trace here the habitual shuttling from a supposed absolute freedom to a complete surrender to an external fragmented reality.

The Transcendentalist tradition in philosophy and literature manifests, then, the main traits of the structure of the capitalist view of man. This is neither co-incidental nor fortuitous, for the Transcendentalist imagination was rooted in the socio-economic données of early nineteenth-century America, a time when industrial capitalism in that country was quite sure of itself and self-reliant, to use an Emersonian term, looking forward to the paradise of plenty that was just around the corner. Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalist thinkers propagated capitalist ideology, perhaps unconsciously. They were personally opposed to money-making, saving, hard-work, imperialist and capitalist expansion, and several other capitalist «virtues» and ethical traits ; but, whether they were aware of it or not, their view of man was that of capitalism.

This point will lead us to the concluding remarks on methodology. The study of the structure of the outlook on man solves many problems which bedevil the literary critic and scholar. For one thing, it solves the problem of having to handle the «intentions» of the creator, since the concept of structure makes these intentions largely irrelevant. Moreover such a structural analysis can perhaps show us relationships hitherto unperceived, for the idea of structure tries to reach the highest level of abstraction that can explain the greatest number of variants and the web of relationships that tie them together. The concept of structure can also solve the eternal problem facing the literary critic who wants to make the leap from the «historical background» to the work of art itself (or from the socio-economic «open» structure, to the literary «self-enclosed» structure). The study of the latent structure of the age's view of man makes the leap unnecessary, because it shows the underlying unity between the artist and his work on the one hand, and the historical background, on the other. To put it differently, and

perhaps in more familiar terms, the study of the structure of the age's view of man is an attempt to study the *Zeitgeist*, not only as the general *esprit* of the age, but also as a web of concrete relationships that make up the structure of the age and all of its human products, be they political, philosophical, or literary. As such, perhaps we can combine the intuitive perception of the whole with the empirical study of details, solving thereby the problem that faces the human sciences, escaping thereby the Transcendentalist predicament that could be seen as an over-due trust in subjective intuitions divorced from any reality, and an over-due interest in details and fragments divorced from any conception of the whole. The subjectivity of intuition is not enough, the objectivity of empiricism is not adequate, for there must always be a reciprocity — an ennobling «interchange», as Wordsworth suggested. The great English romantic considered himself a lover of nature, yet he was neither a slavish observer of its beauty nor an idealistic dreamer about absolute ideas latent in it, he was rather a lover of all the mighty world of eye, and ear; «both what they half create and *What perceive.*»

#### NOTES

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17. **Ibid.**, p. 147.
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30. **Ibid.**, p. 186
31. «The Poet», **Selections from Emerson**, p.233
32. **Ibid.**, p. 237
33. **Ibid.**, p.224.
34. **Ibid.**, p.237.
35. **Ibid.**, p. 225.
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38. **Ibid.**, p. 224.
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40. **The American Trasscendentalists**, p. 165.