

EXPLORATION OF IDENTICAL IDEAS: WORDSWORTH AND EMERSON

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Abstract

This article deals with the similarities between American Transcendentalism and British Romanticism, more precisely between William Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson's engagement with Individualism and Nature. Wordsworth, one of the revolutionary thinkers of the Romantic period, has dealt with the life of the ordinary man and Emerson, one of the prophets of American Transcendentalism, has dealt with freethinking and the liberty of the people. The article examines the basic structures of both American Transcendentalism and British Romanticism and how the society of the period played a significant role in shaping the philosophical mindsets of both Emerson and Wordsworth. The article concludes with a brief discussion on the identical ideas delivered by both Wordsworth and Emerson in their respective writings.

Keywords: Wordsworth, Emerson, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Nature, Individualism.

Introduction

The history of 19th century Europe is eventful. The Industrial Revolution as well as the French Revolution had a far reaching impact on the economic, political, social, and more importantly, religious structure of Europe. Class distinction and slavery were the main problems during the time that chained the poorer classes. Under the rule of King Louis XVI the governing system was tyrannical. The right of common people was denied. The outburst of the neglected common people was exposed through French Revolution. It was driven by the principles of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" and thus freed the chain of the common people from the clutches of the aristocratic people after the execution of King Louis XVI. Free thinking was established which, according to Da Cunha Albuquerque (2011), is "(n)ow man was free to feel and to imagine". The Industrial Revolution broke the feudal system of England. Rural people began to migrate to industrial cities in order to get better jobs. The merchant class started exploiting the common people. The result was "(t)he rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer" (Chin 2002:653).

After these two movements in Europe, a new literary movement started in England called Romanticism, the aim of which was to give importance to the common people who were neglected by the new classicists who emphasized "technical perfections rather than innovation or natural genius" (Rahman 2009:64). Another significant factor of the period was writing should be concerned with "the momentous action of royal or aristocratic characters in an appropriately elevated style" which was totally contradictory to the Romantic Movement (Abrams 2007:185).

From the very early stages his life, William Wordsworth experienced the beautiful natural scenery of his village, and when he was studying at Cambridge, he visited different rural villages with natural beauty. This seemed to be the inspiration for Wordsworth to create something different. Wordsworth experienced the French Revolution himself. He was a true supporter of the French Revolution but he was soon frustrated by “the blood of the aged, the innocent, of the defenseless sex, of the ministers of religion, and of the faithful adherents of a fallen monarch” (Dickinson 216:1974). Disturbed by the consequences of the French and Industrial Revolutions, Wordsworth sought pleasure in Nature, its healing power, its grander use, and its relationship with human beings.

America gained independence from the British Empire towards the end of the 18th century. But even after independence the nation was going through extreme problems. From 1812 to 1814, America engaged itself in a bloody war against England. The 1840s was marked by several bank failures leading to extreme unemployment. At this critical time, “various reform movements such as antislavery, temperance, the debates on women’s fights, and even the nativist attacks on catholic immigrants and institutions...” took place (Baym 2007:440). Emerson was a part of one such reform called the Transcendental Movement.

Emerson, a prominent American transcendentalist came into contact with prominent British Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1832 when he visited Europe for the first time. It is assumed that the visit had a tremendous influence on Emerson. After the publication of ‘Nature’ in 1836, it became clear that most of its major ideas had been borrowed from Eastern philosophy (He is mostly famous for his revolutionary essays like ‘Nature’, ‘Self Reliance’, ‘The American Scholar’, and ‘The Over-Soul’. In these essays he speaks of the philosophy he was influenced by. The implementation of those philosophies are found in his famous poems like ‘Days’, ‘The Rhodora’, ‘Brahma’ and many other natural poems.

Looking back at the social, economic, and political problems in both America and England in the late 18th and early 19th century, it is obvious that the contemporary oppressed society resulting from tyranny and oppression led both Wordsworth and Emerson to bring into effect some revolutionary changes in the field of literature and philosophy by breaking the traditional law of thinking. That is why Rizvi and Abbasi (2013) state that there is a similarity between American Transcendentalism and British Romanticism because both philosophies saw, “the corruption of society and subsequently of man” (1).

Treatment toward Nature

Healing power

There is no doubt that both Wordsworth and Emerson see nature as paramount. Sometimes, they use Nature as a simple imagery to imply the greatest truth of the universe or to explain its healing qualities. Wordsworth, in ‘I wandered Lonely as a Cloud’ depicts a beautiful picture of daffodils, hills, valleys, and as a whole a beautiful natural landscape. This beauty heals his body as well as his soul. The poet is in a pensive mood; recalling the beauty removes his sadness and creates a pleasurable feeling within the poet. It is similar to W.B. Yeats’s ‘The lake Isle of Innisfree’ where the poet shows how his recollection of the imaginary world of Innisfree removes his boredom in London city. In ‘Michael’ as well, Wordsworth shows the distinction between city life, village life and nature as healing. As long as Luke is in the village with his parents his mind is dominated by simplicity. Nature awakes the spirituality within him by means of its healing power. When he ends his relationship with village his thoughts become clouded and dark. Here,

Wordsworth's meaning comes across perfectly. He says in 'Tables turned; an evening scene on the same subject':

He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let nature be your teacher." (Wordsworth 1984:L13-16)

In the third part of 'Nature' Emerson has spoken of 'Beauty' of nature. He has shown three properties of Beauty. The first is concerned with delight, that is when a person gets bored with his daily activities he can relieve his boredom by being in contact with Nature. He says,

"The tradesman, attorney come out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods and is a man again" (Baym 2007:496).

In the 7th and 8th stanza of 'Ode Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', Wordsworth claims, as we grow older, our innocence and intuition change and we cannot grasp the healing power of Nature as we are supposed to. Another reason behind our failure to understand nature is that adults try to seek it in their active minds, whereas it has to be understood through the child's subconscious mind, which we gradually lose when we grow old. Emerson also believes this. That is why he says, "Few adult persons can see nature" (Baym 2007:494). Like Wordsworth, he too asserts that only children can penetrate the realm of the mystery of nature while adults cannot.

Nonetheless it is important to note that as Wordsworth experienced natural beauty from childhood, there is an outburst of powerful feelings of natural beauty in his poems. There is spontaneity in them. But Emerson had not experienced nature like Wordsworth. Therefore his pictorial description of nature seems to be somewhat artificial. But even so the powerful philosophy he ideates through his essays cannot be ignored.

Language

Wordsworth has explained the basic and distinguishing features of his poetry in 'Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*'. He says he has taken "incidents and situations from common life" and used "a selection of language really used by man" (Wordsworth 2010:49). A noticeable thing is Wordsworth's attitude toward Language in expressing the realm of nature. He believes that the spiritual reality lies in the language of the common people. Emerson has also echoed this idea in 'Nature'. The fourth section of the essay is concerned with Language, that is, the relationship between Language, Nature, and Spirituality. At the very beginning of 'Language' Emerson exemplified it by showing how every word bears the meaning of natural objects of earth and how over the course of time, human beings forget the spiritual reality of language.

In the second part of 'Language', he clearly depicts how gradually Language loses its natural spontaneity when simple-minded people corrupt their minds by placing emphasis on different kinds of materialistic desires. And thus "Falsehood takes place of simplicity and truth" (Baym 2007:501). Like Wordsworth, Emerson also thinks that only the original language can portray the real picture of nature while people corrupted by desires distort the noble picture of nature, which he has ascertained thusly:

“When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise, And duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost” (Baym 2007:501).

Integrity of natural elements

To Wordsworth, humans are a part of nature. That is why in almost every poem he tries to show a connection between humans and nature. All objects in nature are linked to or integrated with one another. If an object in nature is out of place, discord arises in the connection. Many Romantic poets show this in their poetry. For example, in “The Shepherd”, William Blake shows the innocence of a shepherd and how the shepherd’s role is making the natural atmosphere of the sheep charming. So, undoubtedly it has to be admitted that every natural object is integrated with each other. Similarly, Wordsworth has shown a perfect description of ‘Integrity’ in his famous poem, ‘Michael’. In this poem he depicts the simple lifestyle of a shepherd in a village. The poet also shows a beautiful combination between humans and the rural environment. The last part of the poem is interesting from a philosophical point of view. Luke, the son of Michael, is also pleased to be living his life in the village. But the problem arises when Luke has to go to London to become prosperous. It ultimately breaks the integrity or communion between man and nature. The result of which is that the simple, innocent Luke becomes a sophisticated figure after going to the city. At last, he leaves his duty towards his parents; he takes “evil courses”. The following contradictory impressions make the point clear:

“But soon as Luke, full ten years old, could stand
Against the mountain blasts; and to the heights,
Not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,” (Wordsworth 1984:194-196)

“He in the dissolute city gave himself
To evil courses; ignominy and shame” (Wordsworth 1984:446-447)

By saying so Wordsworth means that there is integrity in every part and particle of nature. When the integrity vanishes, indiscipline arises. Luke’s evil attitude is evidence of that.

According to Emerson, when a nature lover inwardly seems to be pleased by natural beauty, Nature echoes, “he is my creature” (Baym 2007:502). This is how humans act as a part of Nature. To Emerson, every part and particle are interrelated which he discusses in ‘Each and All’. In the poem he says one morning he hears the sweet music of a sparrow from the bough of alder tree. The poet thinks the music to be divine. Then he brings the bird to his home along with its nest. The bird still sings song. But the music is not as sweet as it sung on the bough of alder tree. This shows a perfect combination or integration between the natural world of the sparrow and the sparrow. When the sparrow loses its original, familiar place, the music of the bird also loses its spontaneity. The poet then tells another story in the poem. Once the poet saw some seashells on the beach. Bubbles produced by the sea waves were continuously washing the shells and thus gave a pear-like appearance to them. The fascinated poet took them up and brought them to his house, but unfortunately, the seashells did not look as beautiful as did when they were on the shore. It is another metaphor for the communion between one’s place of origin and oneself.

City life

Undoubtedly it has to be admitted that most Romantic poets were against the so-called civilized society of the city. Emerson also felt this way. Wordsworth had an unfavorable outlook toward London. Due to the urbanization that resulted from the Industrial Revolution, the city began to lose its natural beauty. That is why, P.B. Shelley compared London with hell. However, even though Wordsworth felt this way about London, he discovered the innocent beauty of London by removing the vanity of urbanization. A clear picture of it can be found in 'Composed on Westminster Bridge', where he says,

"All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendor, valley, rock and hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep" (Wordsworth 1984:8-11)

Wordsworth's attitude toward city life is noteworthy. Due to Industrial Revolution many big industries were established in London which ultimately destroyed the natural beauty of the city. But "nothing is ugly or common place in his world" (Long 2013:383). That is why Wordsworth is seen to be uncovering the beauty of industrial London city in the morning when the air is 'smokeless'.

Emerson's attitude toward city life is similar to that of Wordsworth's. Like his contemporaries, Emerson too thought that people living in the city are living hectic lives. Staying away from natural beauty, people begin to emphasize different kinds of materialistic desires. That is why in 'Nature' he says that after leading a busy day, if an attorney or tradesman comes into contact with nature, he transforms from a material creature to a man. Again he creates a crystal clear difference between city life and country life and shows his support for country life saying that:

"...may suggest the advantage which the country-life possesses for a powerful mind, over the artificial and curtailed life of cities" (Baym 2007:502)

Individualism

What is Individualism?

According to Nederman (2005), Individualism is the principle of individual dignity, giving less priority to "communal, metaphysical, cosmological, or religious" issues. The origin of this ideology dates back to ancient Indian philosophy where the definition of it has been incorporated with immortality of soul and 'karma', implying that "individual deeds are the wellspring of the moral system" Nederman (2005). Socrates (469-399) defined the term with the pronouncement of "Know thyself" (Rappe 1995). Again contemporary writers or readers look at the term in a negative way. In France, some thought it to be a spark of social anarchy and problems while others thought it to be a part of "desirable social order" (Lukes 1971:54). 'Individualism' is a complex ideology, which has been defined by scholars for centuries in different ways. In fact, different religions illustrate it in different ways.

At the very beginning of the Transcendental Movement in America, the concern was not the reformation of the individual but rather it was the reformation of society, ensuring equality among laborers and factory owners and equality between males and females. But these reformations failed. Emerson emerged as the central spokesman of the Transcendentalists from the early 1830s and his chief objective was the reformation of the individual not society. Even though critics argued the Emersonian theory of 'Individualism' was 'dangerous', O'Dwyer (2012) argues it to be a "positive commitment to individual autonomy, in thought and in action, and despite ample evidence of evil..." (102).

Romantics got the idea of 'Individualism' from Rousseau's famous pronouncement of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" of individuals during the French Revolution (Censer 2001). But they have given it a new shape by removing the dark sides (violence and turbulence) of Individualism. They use the term for greater purpose. Morner and Ralph (2006) characterize the romantic period with "subjectivity, and emphasis on individualism; spontaneity; freedom from rules; solitary life rather than life in society..." (191). That is why William Blake speaks of individual rights of the black and labor class people in 'The chimney Sweeper' and 'The Little Black Boy'.

Concept of bookish knowledge

Emerson's idea of 'Individualism' was similar to that of Socrates. Like Socrates, Emerson emphasized one's own thinking, and self-expression. At the very beginning of 'Self-reliance', Emerson echoes the thoughts of Socrates saying that, "...they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought" (Baym 2007:533). So, here he is totally "opposed to dependence on others" (O'Dwyer 2012:103). In fact, he thinks bookish knowledge conveys the message of others, which hinders the progress of one's creative faculty. Wordsworth has also dealt with a similar kind of philosophy in his 'Tables Turned; An Evening Scene on The Same Subject', he begins his poem saying,

"Up! Up! My Friend, and quit your books;" (Wordsworth L1)

According to him, in order to be an Individualist a person needs to stop his book-learning and go to nature. If he can create a relationship with nature he will think different from others because his thinking will be directed by intuitive knowledge. He says:

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:

Come, hear the woodland linnet" (Wordsworth 1984:L9-10)

Bookish knowledge is a great impediment in the progress of one's union with the great soul. A person may get knowledge about God through reading books. But those who seek Him intuitively find him in his creation.

Individualism in childhood

Wordsworth has shown different stages of 'Individualism'. In 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', he says, childhood is the primary stage of 'Individualism'. He holds the view that before the arrival of a child on the earth, the child has good moments with a heavenly beauty. In the 5th and 6th stanza of the poem, the poet says, for a short span of life a child can retain his heavenly glory

but he gradually loses it when he becomes habituated with earthly pleasures, social tricks and so on. Thus he gradually loses his Individualist attitude and begins to give priority to social traditions. And thus the child,

“Forget the glories hath known
And that imperial palace whence came” (Wordsworth 1984:L84-85)

After forgetting the “glories” he begins to imitate what he has been taught by society. Wordsworth says about childhood that, “As if his whole vocation/ were endless imitation” (Wordsworth 1984:L107-108).

According to Emerson as well, childhood is the most nonconformist or individualist stage of a person. Then the child begins to respond the social manners and behavior and at last gradually loses his innocence because he gradually becomes dependent on others in every sphere. That is why his speech becomes political (to please society) rather becoming revolutionary or truthful. A practical demonstration of ‘Individualist’ attitude can be found in ‘The Scarlet Letter’. Pearl, the daughter of Hester Prynne is the perfect embodiment of childish individualist outlook. She has been described to be the most unusual childish character in literature. Her individualist attitude is evident from the very beginning when she is first introduced. Whenever her fascination for the scarlet ‘A’ of her mother arises, she, without any hesitation, asks her mother about it, sometimes she makes fun of it. That is why Emerson says,

“He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests; which gives an independent, genuine verdict.” (Baym 2007:534)

And again when in the forest Hester has cast the scarlet letter, Pearl feels greatly disturbed. She is pacified when Hester picks up the letter and fixes it on her bosom. That is why, Emerson says,

“Infancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it.” (Baym 2007:534)

Like Wordsworth, Emerson illustrates the point in one of his poems named “Hamatreya” where the poet critically rebukes traditional attitude of human being. No doubt about the fact that, there is a pessimistic tone in the poem for those who blindly follow traditional law of possessing as much land as a person can afford.

Solitude

In of Wordsworth’s poems, it can be found that Wordsworth is celebrating his solitude. He is not lonely but rather “he had the company with nature...” (Da Cunha Albuquerque 2011:4). This kind of solitude helps the poet to know himself, to know his own heart, which are the chief pronouncements of ‘Individualist’ theory of Emerson. Rizi and Abbasi (2013), mention that “solitude crops up in the wake of non-conformity”, because in solitude a person discovers his own heart and soul, and thus, “it gives rise to inconsistency”, resulting in hearing his own heart by avoiding social and traditional structure (Rizi and Abbasi 2013:2). Emerson says, “I chide society, I embrace solitude” (Baym 2007:713). Because he knows very well that a person cannot

enrich freethinking remaining in society or crowd. Only solitude can enhance freethinking and thus make him 'Individualist'.

Mysticism

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, England has seen drastic changes in literature. During the neo classical age, the focus was specifically on the rules laid down by the classical Greek literature. Scholars characterized the Romantic period as being anticlassical. But actually it was an era when both Western and Eastern classical tradition existed side by side. That is why in Romantic poems we find mysticism, which was a part of Ancient Indian literature. Like the hermits or saints of ancient Hindus, Wordsworth passed the most important part of his life in mountains, vales, and as a whole with nature, contemplating the basic essence of humans. Wordsworth is called a poet of nature. But his skill of blending the divine sense with the natural landscape is extra-ordinary.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman were all believers of the ideology of 'mysticism' of ancient Hindu scriptures which was reflected in their work. Soni Singh (2015) states that, "Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in The Edinburgh Review between 1820 and 1825". The study of various sorts of Indian philosophies "augmented the waters of mysticism" within Emerson (Singh 2015:2). His description of mysticism was sometimes ambiguous due to the fact that he sometimes tried to mingle it with 'pantheism', another significant Indian ideology.

Like Individualism, Mysticism is a complex ideology defined by scholars in different ways. In every religion, there is a practical explanation of the term. "Mysticism is a religious practice in which people try to get knowledge of truth and to become united with God through meditation" (Summers, 2007:1052). William J. Long (2013) says, "All nature is the reflection of the living God" (383).

Renu (2014) has divided Wordsworth's love for nature into three stages; the third and final of which is "a spiritual and mystical apprehension of the inner spirit of nature" (91). "It is a Beauteous Evening" is a mystic poem of Wordsworth's. In the poem the poet says once he was walking with his daughter along the sea-shore of Calais. He describes the moment to be 'holy' and awakening in him a 'tranquility'. Such experiences with the natural world evoke the meditative power of the poet, and he feels the existence of almighty God. This sensation derives only when a person becomes united with God or everything seems to be Godlike. He says,

"Listen! The mighty being is awake,
And doth his eternal motion make" (Wordsworth 1984:L6-7)

The poem 'Tintern Abbey' has mostly been analyzed from the perspective of pantheism by scholars. Nonetheless it has to be admitted that the meditative nature the poet shows is very mystical. The poem begins with great enthusiasm, as he is visiting the river Wye after five years. He is amazed at the healing power of the river. Even when he was away from the river, just a simple imagining of the river could heal his mind. And whenever the poet fell in any kind of mental or spiritual crisis, he "turned to thee (55)". He derives such pleasure at that moment that he feels the existence of his living soul. He is so much passionate toward the realm of nature that he feels the existence of a spirit which eventually unites him with God.

“A presence that disturbs me with the joy,
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime,” (Wordsworth 1984:L96-97)

So through meditation the poet becomes united with the divine spirit. Similarly, in ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge’, the poet portrays the beauty of London city in lucid manner. He is so relaxed and healed that he begins to discover the creator who is behind such beautiful creation. And such realization derives out of contemplative sensation toward natural beauty. The poet says,

“Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.” (Wordsworth 1984:L13-14)

On the other hand, Emerson’s mysticism in his poetry is not as lively or spontaneous as Wordsworth’s. He has portrayed his philosophy of mysticism in his ‘Essays’ and in his poetry. As has been mentioned earlier, he was not in direct contact with nature like Thoreau or Wordsworth, therefore his spiritual conviction seems to be a bit complex. His spiritual conviction is much more pantheistic rather than mystic. For instance, in ‘Hamatreya’, the poet rebukes the possessive nature of human being. In the poem, the poet has given the sense of ‘over soul’ to the earth and the earth is making fun of people for having possessive desires. Here, his philosophy is not the union of him with God but finding God within every object of nature. In ‘Rhodora’, the poet’s mystical view is evident. Like Wordsworth, Emerson looks at every natural object from a spiritual point of view. The way Wordsworth finds pleasure in daffodil, Emerson seems to be deriving such kind of pleasure from Rhodora. At the beginning stage of the pleasure the Rhodora seems to be healing the heart of the poet. And then in the final stage the flower evokes spirituality within him, which leads him to say:

“But, in my simple ignorance suppose
The self-same power that brought me there brought.” (Baym 2007:L15-16)

It makes him feel conscious of the supreme being of the universe as well as His creation. He has pronounced his idea of ‘Mysticism’ mostly in his ‘Self-reliance’, ‘Nature’. He theoretically claims that when a person goes to the woods to try to understand the spiritual beauty of nature, he discovers his own self-realization. When this self-realization reaches at the highest level human being becomes “Part or particle of God’ (Baym 2007:494). Here, he is in fact blending both pantheism and mysticism together. He sometimes feels the existence of the over-soul or he becomes a part of that over-soul. In the 7th part of ‘Nature’ he affirms his belief saying “restoring the unity by becoming unified with himself again, by gaining wisdom through prayer...” (Gale 1986:87). Nonetheless it has to be admitted that he has made his spiritual world complex like that of Wordsworth.

Conclusion

It can be firmly said that similar social crises gave birth to almost similar reactions. Even though Emerson and Wordsworth were from different continents, they possessed almost similar

ideologies; be they Individualism or Transcendentalism. Their roles seem to be the same: upholding the rights of the common people. Their respective literatures are clear examples of it. They reacted against “intellectual realism, objective reasoning and barren religious dogma” (Rizi and Abbasi 2013:1). Their aim was to bring a significant change in the intellectual realm of the common people by cutting down the intellectual chains laid down by scholars.

Both of them were equally devoted toward the common people. Racism created a class distinction in American society in the 19th century. Emerson himself was against slavery. Industrial revolution also created a similar kind of class distinction in England towards the end of the 18th century. Labourers were tortured financially and physically. Therefore, their spokesmen, Emerson and Wordsworth, gave hope to these common people through their writings. Their aim was to eradicate the inferiority complex of the common people and give them the heavenly glory which God sent them. Individualism and Mysticism from the perspective of Romanticism gave the common people the rights which were taken away from them by the contemporary society.

Their treatment of nature is also identical in many respects and is obviously contrary to the materialistic lifestyle. The aim of such treatment of nature was to create an ideal philosophy of focusing on nature, when people were shifting their lifestyles toward materialism. Their revolutionary concept added a new dimension in the literary and philosophical histories of England and America. At times, Emerson seems to be showing extremist attitude because he was very much against society’s laws, but his pronouncement of ‘Individualism’ was to ensure ‘autonomy’ in freethinking and free expression.

Endnotes

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Note: All references on Emerson’s Essays have been taken from The Norton Anthology American Literature.

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