Transcendentalism and the Notion of ‘Self’ in 
Select Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Abstract: Ralph Waldo Emerson was a renowned American essayist, philosopher, 
poet, and leader of the Transcendentalist movement in the early nineteenth 
century. His philosophy and his approach to various social, literary, philosophical 
and spiritual aspects of life is reflected in his collections of Essays published in 
two series in 1841 and 1844 and in his other longer essays. The paper sheds light 
on the background of the ‘Transcendentalist movement’ and the dual influences of 
two preceding movements of America on ‘Transcendentalist movement’ during 
first quarter of the nineteenth century. The paper attempts to explore the notion of 
self in Emerson’s essays namely, ‘Nature’, ‘The American Scholar’, ‘Self- 
Reliance’, and ‘The Over-Soul’ focusing how ‘self’ can be regenerated and 
discovered. It also brings forth his ideas on how individuals can forge an 
independent mind frame for themselves and reshape American culture and distinct 
identity of the nation.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, Emerson’s essays, Self, Transcendent self, 
Spiritual awakening

1. Introduction
Transcendentalism was a religious, literary, and political movement that evolved from 
two preceding movements of early nineteenth century, namely, New England 
Unitarianism and Romanticism. R. W. Emerson’s essay entitled ‘Nature’ was published in 
1836. This essay had such a tremendous influence on the thinkers and intellectuals of the 
time that it was considered as the manifesto of a new movement that was known as 
Transcendentalism. This new movement inaugurated the American Renaissance with 
many writings, essentially philosophical essays, which not only analyzed the intellectual 
but also social, moral, religious and political situations of the USA and emphasized on 
search for an independent spirit. Transcendentalists were essentially philosophers and 
thinkers yet some novelists such as Hawthorne or Melville, and poets such as Walt
Whitman and Emily Dickinson felt indebted towards this movement as it had a deep impact on their writings. Transcendentalist movement was principally associated with the work of journalist and feminist theorist Margaret Fuller; Theodore Parker - an Unitarian minister and antislavery advocate; Henry David Thoreau essayist-a naturalist, and political theorist along with Ralph Waldo Emerson as the leader of the movement. Initially, the transcendentalists supported the Unitarian theological rebellion against Calvinist beliefs of the Puritans and gradually moved toward a spirituality that believed each individual is capable to move towards spiritual development and fulfillment. Transcendentalists expressed themselves through literary and theological forms and consequently influenced American literary and artistic culture more than its religion.

Emerson’s two controversial addresses at Harvard, “The American Scholar” (1837) and the Divinity School Address (1838) established his position as the representative of the ministers and litterateurs who questioned religious doctrines and followed German and the British Romantics. During late 1830s and 1840s, Transcendentalists developed theological and literary thinking in three interrelated directions. Theodore Parker and Emerson moved further with their theological explorations. At that time, Parker proclaimed that a religion should be based on ‘permanent’ principles. Having fascinated towards Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism Emerson and Thoreau made extensive study of the scriptures that were becoming available in English translations at that time. Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau gave a literary hue to the movement. Emerson contributed through his innovative prose, Fuller made translations and critical studies of Goethe, and Thoreau composed autobiographical narrative Walden (1854).

2. ‘Nature’: Introduction to the Notion of ‘Self’

In his essay ‘Nature’ Emerson brings forth and attempts to solve an abstract problem: that humans do not fully accept nature’s beauty. He writes that people are distracted by the demands of the world, whereas nature gives but humans fail to reciprocate. The essay reflects his pantheistic view of the world that God is everywhere in this world. The essay encompasses the following eight parts - Nature; Commodity; Beauty; Language,; Discipline; Idealism; Spirit; and Prospects. According to Emerson, Nature is the place where individuals can find God. Nature is pious; source of nourishment and of beauty and inspiration for artists and poets. He writes: It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it” (Nature).

Nature alone can give what man needs and it is where God communicates with him and here only he can regenerate himself without taking resort to any institutional religion. He writes: “When we consider Spirit, we see that the views already presented do not include
the whole circumference of man. We must add some related thoughts” (Nature). Thus, Emerson’s only religion is Nature and he advises man to turn to Nature so that he may explore his true self. ‘Self’ has been a key word in this essay and even in all his works. Thus, deserting his former Unitarian Church Emerson finds Nature as his new religion. In this essay Emerson also opines that there is a necessity for a new way of looking at the world. Man must learn to open his eyes as if he is opening them for the first time in his life. When he does away his preconception and other influences he will be able to look at the world differently. "I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all", he writes (Nature). The "I", therefore, becomes the "eye", and he explains that this new and fresh way of looking at the world will be helpful in discovery of the ‘self’. The metaphor of the ‘transparent eyeball’ is a representation of an eye that is absorbent rather than reflective. Due to being absorbent it takes in all that is there in nature’s bounty. After its publication in 1836, ‘Nature’ was only read by a few intellectuals still it had deep influence on them. The thinkers who identified their thoughts compatible to Emerson’s essays joined him in Concord, the town where he was residing at that time. With their combined efforts the ‘transcendental club’ was founded and they even started publishing their own newspaper, ‘Dial’. Initially, the term ‘Transcendentalism’ was used by the critics of this movement but finally it came to represent a philosophical movement that believed in immanence of the divine in the world as well as man’s ability to find himself without taking help of institutional religion or Churches.

3. ‘The American Scholar’: Further Development of the notion of ‘Self’

Emerson delivered a lecture entitled ‘The American Scholar’ in 1837. The lecture which was published later became very popular and it was termed as the ‘American Intellectual Declaration of Independence’. The theme of the essay is his urge to his countrymen to discard tradition and foreign influences. He invokes the countrymen that they must have a national culture, typically American and it must not be linked to European cultures at all. There is another dimension of his urge that a writer, who wants to create truly national literature, must be aware of his true self. Here the notion of ‘self’ that was introduced in his first essay ‘Nature’ is developed further in this essay. He means to say that a writer must explore his true self so that he may listen to it and trust it without getting affected to the external influences. This implies that this writer needs to proceed independently. He says, “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul” (The American Scholar). Like Emerson, this scholar must be intellectually, morally, spiritually, and culturally. He must rely on his own self and try his best to express it through his works.
4. ‘Self-Reliance’

Emerson’s essay entitled ‘Self-Reliance’ was published in 1841. In this essay he points to the imitation of a new age which will place individual in the centre of everything. His idea reiterates the philosophy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism which both highly valued individual. Here, Emerson tries to place individual, is ‘self’ at the heart of his society. His idea is not of selfishness rather his conception of self refers to the personal development which will be the foundation of a harmonious society. In this essay, he focuses on the idea of an ‘ideal society’. Ideal society will consist of distinct individuals; it will not be a crowd of similar individuals. Therefore, he makes it a point that one should not be a conformist as conformism was a kind of danger in the 1840s USA. This shows that he once again emphasizes individuality. He writes, “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (Self-Reliance). According to him, a society does not require learned and educated people rather it must have the individuals who endeavor to develop their own selves, enriches their own culture and education. Emerson urges people to reform themselves and they should not wait that reforms will come from society. They can do this by making them free from strict habits and conventions; from a traditional and irrelevant education and preconceived notions. Enlisting qualities of a Self-reliant man Emerson opines that he is the one who can define his own needs and beliefs; he does not require external influences such as influences made by educational institutions and Churches. A Self-Reliant person finds himself in harmony with nature.

5. ‘The Over Soul’

‘The Over Soul’ is contained in the 1841 edition of Emerson’s Essays. The essay gives a detailed and comprehensive account of his faith in God who is present in each one of us and we can communicate with him and for that an individual does not need to be a member of Church or should take help from priests. There are two poems in the epigraph of the essay. The first poetic epigraph is from Henry More’s ‘Psychozoia’, or, the ‘Life of Soul’ (1647). The reason why Emerson chose this poem is that it directly addresses both the individual soul and the all-encompassing soul of God. The poem also expresses More’s belief that the multiple souls on earth belonging to the individual soul merge with God or, in words of Emerson “the eternal one” “But souls that of his own good life partake,......They live, they live in blest eternity” (“The Over Soul”). This also sheds light on the theme of ‘the many’ and ‘the one’. In this essay, Emerson has focused on human soul whereas in his other essays he has described the participation of humanity in
various processes of nature. He idea is that human souls are the both individual and part of nature’s whole. Therefore, without many, there cannot be one, without the one many cannot exist. Emerson’s own poem forms the epigraph of the essay. The poem entitled ‘Unity’ rejects the idea of duality. The idea refers to the natural contrast between certain things. Still, contrasting pairs cannot exist without the other. “Space is ample, east and west……That works its will on age and hour” (‘The Over Soul’). With this introduction Emerson intends to define the Over Soul. He affirms his faith in the existence of a ‘spirit of prophecy which is innate in every man’(‘The Over Soul’).The spirit of God is present in every soul and this shows great respect to God in return.

Emerson takes the idea of the many and the one further by saying that each one of us actually represents all the other souls in this world as each soul is part of God. Bringing to light how Over Soul establishes a bond between everything in this world and manifests itself, he says that all conversations exhibit the spirit of God. As he writes, “In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made to a third party, to a common nature. That third party is not social; it is impersonal; is God” (‘The Over Soul’). This noticeable presence of Over Soul in groups facilitates people to act in a nobler manner once they are aware of its presence. Therefore, accessibility to Over Soul is the central element in this common bond between everyone. This mediating soul cannot be defined in words. Taking up the issue of the relationship between the Over Soul and society, Emerson says that God is present in everyone of us still it is very difficult to put in words how we recognize his presence. He explains this with his concept of ‘Revelation’: “an influx of the Divine mind into our mind”. He has used ‘mind’ to denote the singularity of our collective thinking that is linked to one to the other by the common bond.

The Over Soul is the divine spirit of the universe and it is present both in Nature and in man. In man it is present in form of ‘Transcendent Self’. The aim of man is to merge his self with the Over Soul after developing his self and discovering his self and finally attains self- knowledge and harmony. Thus, the Over Soul is the universal spirit that human beings share but it also reflects the promise for self–discovery and thus it is a kind of achievement that is personal. Thus, Emerson tries to find a new, spiritual identity and way of life and distrusted society and its educational, religious, moral rules. He realizes that the USA is becoming interested in wealth generation and material success as there is rapid industrialization taking place that is affecting original ideals of the society. That is why he urges people to bring out their individuality and not to make efforts for uniformity in society.
6. Conclusion

In most of his essays, Emerson has brought forth his notion of the ‘self’ and urged people to develop and discover it so that they may be able to merge it with the transcendental self present in them. For that they need to change their way to look at the world around and find new spirituality. They need to be there in proximity of nature and discover their own selves. He has sometimes bitterly expressed his doubts about the future of America if the country did not undergo a profound intellectual and moral transformation. Widely known as ‘Great Awakener’, Emerson left a deep influence on nineteenth century America as he tried his best to make people open their eyes on a new era, new possibility for his countrymen.

References

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