

STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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# THE USES OF OBSERVATION

*A Study of Correspondential Vision  
in the Writings of  
Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman*

*by*

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*In Memoriam*

C. H. Wells



## PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to examine the development and use of correspondence by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. By "correspondence" I mean the relationship perceived to exist between external phenomena and internal realities, events, or states of being. It will be necessary further to define and restrict this term when referring to the particular practitioners of the correspondential method, for although the three authors in question saw in the external world a vast silent language, they each had different ways to decipher it.

I propose, in effect, to present here one chapter in the history of an ancient idea. I limit myself roughly to the middle half of the 19th century, 1825-1875, to American literature, and to the works of only three of its writers. Although these men have been called "Transcendentalists", this is not a study of that complex of diverse and often contradictory ideas, but an attempt to isolate what Arthur Lovejoy termed an "idea unit". In his preface to *The Great Chain of Being* he defined idea units as "implicit or completely explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits*, operating in the thought of an individual or a generation."<sup>1</sup> As far as this study is concerned it is not essential to prove whence and how an idea or image was transmitted from German philosophers or British poets to American "Transcendentalists". Whether it be coincidence or direct influence, it will suffice to indicate that certain thoughts and ways of expression

<sup>1</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea*, p. 7.

were "in the air". My subject, then, will be principally the use of an idea and not the method of its transmission.

In my studies of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, I have tried to limit my scope of enquiry to their use of correspondential vision and the effects of this habit on them, and have accordingly neglected all aspects of their life and work peripheral to this restricted scope. As Lovejoy said, the procedure necessary for such a study "requires that we deal only with a part of the thought of any one philosopher or any one age. The part, therefore, must never be mistaken for the whole."<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, I have generally found it unnecessary to make reference to Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond and have instead concentrated on his mountain journeys.

I wish to thank the late Richard V. Chase for his help with and encouragement of this project in its early stages; Robert Gorham Davis for his assistance during the long period of composition; and Lewis Leary for his very useful suggestions on the first-draft manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Lovejoy, p. 21.



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## I

### THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF EMERSON'S THEORY OF MEN AND NATURE, 1826-1836

If any common motive runs through the often contradictory writings of this "man without a handle", it is his life-long desire to stand free of circumstances. This very personal motive, stronger than religion, stronger than philosophy, impelled him to deny himself the security of external supports, whether they were the Unitarianism of his father, the philosophical system of Kant and Coleridge, or the fellowship of his Brook Farm friends; even the grief for the loss of a beloved son, who, he made himself declare, was after all "caducous" and not essential to his father's brave and lonely life.

His reading and meditation may be considered an attempt to "think out" the problem of personal freedom. He sought by means of them to penetrate the veils of Maya and to reach the changeless kingdom of Brahma where "shadow and sunlight are the same", and does seem to have attained a high degree of stoic imperturbability. This keynote of the "inviolable mind" was struck quite early in his career, in 1826, in his first sermon:

Every thoughtful man has felt that there was a more awful reality to thought and feeling, than to the infinite panorama of nature around him. The world . . . seems to him at times, when the intellect is invigorated, to ebb from him, like a sea, and to leave nothing permanent but thought.<sup>1</sup>

His philosophical studies were undertaken, paradoxically, to seek support for the premise that Emerson needed no support. Thus his independence was dependent on the ideas of such men as

<sup>1</sup> A. C. McGiffert, *Young Emerson Speaks*, p. 2.

Kant, Coleridge, and Swedenborg. With this motive of his in mind we will proceed to examine his *use* of the ideas of others through the important decade, 1826-1836, which culminated for him with the writing and publication of his first book, *Nature*.

# 1. CARLYLE: AN INTRODUCTION TO GERMAN IDEALISM

Emerson was not unprepared for the impact of German idealism. At Harvard he had been exposed to the principal ideas of Bishop Berkeley, ideas which seemed in their very scepticism to be a possibly potent weapon against scepticism.<sup>2</sup> As Whicher maintains, it was from Berkeley that Emerson derived the "noble doubt" of *Nature*, the doubt "whether nature outwardly exists", and in 1841 he confided to Margaret Fuller that it was Berkeley who converted him from doubt – doubt in the self-sufficiency of the soul – and recalled the joy with which "in my boyhood I caught the first hint of Berkeleyan philosophy, and which I certainly never lost sight of afterwards."<sup>3</sup>

About to begin his third year of divinity school, in the winter of 1826-1827 he was forced by ill health to take a vacation from theological studies. It was on his Southern journey that he jotted down this first, quizzical reference to "Transcendentalism":

Transcendentalism. Metaphysics and Ethics look inward – and France produces Mad. de Stael; England, Wordsworth; America, Sampson Reed; as well as Germany, Swedenborg. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Despite the exuberant playing with ideas which he performed in letters to his Aunt Mary, he was, *in camera*, a sober young professor of the Unitarian faith – or at least so he was determined to be. Emerson, even at the age of 24, was not a man to be swept off his feet. He consequently took a dim view of this inward-looking doctrine of Wordsworth and his visionary colleagues.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Waldo Emerson*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, *Letters*, II, 385 (1841).

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, *Journal*, II, 164 (Feb. 1827).

Later in 1827 he testily noted (with reference to Wordsworth whom he then especially loathed): "Philosophy inverts itself, and poetry grows egotistical"<sup>5</sup> – a curiously misconceived notion of "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude* by the man who was one day to declare that all history is biography and to become himself the master of the egotistical sublime.

Although he had read Coleridge and Sampson Reed in 1826 and had displayed some intellectual enthusiasm over their non-Unitarian ideas, he was not thoroughly involved in contemporary philosophy until the autumn of 1827 when he came upon an unsigned article in the *Edinburgh Review*. Its title was "The State of German Literature" and its author was Thomas Carlyle. Here, in the young Scot's vigorous, forthright exposition of "Kantist" philosophy, Emerson found support for his cherished hope of spiritual self-sufficiency. "The Kantist", wrote Carlyle,

in direct contradiction to Locke and all his followers, both of the French and English or Scotch school, commences from within, and proceeds outwards; instead of commencing from without, and with various precautions and hesitations, endeavouring to proceed inwards. The ultimate aim of all Philosophy must be to interpret appearances, – from the given symbol to ascertain the thing.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps this inner world, the presence of which "every thoughtful man has felt",<sup>7</sup> was the fountainhead of reality; perhaps it was the human mind which imbued "the infinite panorama of nature" – the given symbol – with its own emanant thing-ness. Perhaps he had misjudged "Transcendentalism": it was not that "metaphysics and Ethics look inward", but that they look from within *outward*.

And not only Metaphysics and Ethics – poetic experience also was not applied to the perceiver from without. "Poetic beauty", Carlyle declared, is not, as the associationists taught,

derived from anything external, or of merely intellectual origin; not from association, or any reflex or reminiscence of mere sensations; nor from natural love, either of imitation, of similarity in dissimilarity,

<sup>5</sup> Emerson, *Journal*, II, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Vol. I (1887 edition), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Young Emerson Speaks*, p. 2.