

The Intuitive Self Made Supreme: An Existentialist Reading of Emersonian
Transcendentalism through Sartre's Concepts of Nothingness and Engagement

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This paper will examine the ways in which some of the most significant concepts of Sartrean Existentialism may be accommodated, in a certain measure, within the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and analyse the major variations that occur in this confrontation. This reading of the Transcendentalism of Emerson from a Sartrean perspective shall enable us to define a variant of American Existentialism.

I will focus on Emerson's essays 'Nature' (1836), 'History' (1841) and 'Self-reliance' (1841).¹ These texts will be filtered through selected concepts from Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), namely 'nothingness' and 'commitment' as defined in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and in 'Existentialism & Humanism' (1946).²

These Existentialist concepts will be used as a means of investigation. They will

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', 'History' and 'Self-reliance', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Nature & Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp.35-82, pp.149-73 and pp.175-203 respectively.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2007), and 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 2007).

be briefly defined in their original context, and then read within the American framework of Emersonian Transcendentalism. This reading shall enable us to define a framework for an American variant of Existentialism, a variant that is grounded in the American tradition of Emersonian Transcendentalism.

The question of the actuality and status of an American form of Existentialism is central to the context of this paper. Can there be such a thing as an American Existentialism, and if so, what is its nature? Walter Kaufmann, in his essay on ‘The Reception of Existentialism in the United States’, claims that ‘American philosophy may turn out to be comparable to Roman philosophy: mainly derivative’.³ Kaufmann stresses the importance of the transcontinental movement of philosophy, which has undeniably paved the way for the emergence of Existentialist ideas in North America. Nevertheless, an appreciation of American philosophy as strictly dependent upon European sources is rather reductive: Kaufmann reads twentieth-century Existentialism as a by-product of specific socio-historical conditions. He partly undermines the sovereign impulse of a nation that has been independent for over two centuries, and which has long since produced an intellectual and cultural framework of its own.⁴

Alternately, a certain number of American cultural critics – among them George Cotkin, Norman Mailer and Davis Dunbar McElroy – have emphasised the presence of idiosyncratic Existentialist motifs throughout the cultural and

³ Walter Kaufmann, ‘The Reception of Existentialism in the United States’, in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: New American Library, 1976), pp.90-119 (p.91).

⁴ ‘Kaufmann’s introduction to the volume [*Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956] and the samples of Existentialism that he chose all designated existentialism as part of the European philosophical tradition. [...] Kaufmann’s selections and his introduction make clear that he intended to appropriate existentialism as a discipline of European philosophy’. George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p.148.

literary rationale of post-war America.⁵ Their works evidence the ways in which Existentialism has risen out of and has accommodated itself within, an American context. Such an interpretation envisages the phenomenon of American Existentialism as an inclusive compound of both European and indigenous influences. As George Cotkin argues, ‘American existentialism should be seen as more than a case study in the diffusion of European ideas’.⁶ Through his work *Existential America* (2003), Cotkin aims to ‘trace expressions of existential thinking both as received from European sources and as growing from American minds’.⁷ He shows that Existentialism in America was not exclusively imported from Europe, it was also generated within American culture.

Adopting a similar approach, Ruby Chatterji, in *Existentialism in American Literature* (1983), points out the fundamental role that American Transcendentalists played in the definition of the cultural background of the nation in general, and in the dissemination of existential themes in particular:⁸

To some extent the American concern with the self as manifested by the Transcendentalists (notably Whitman and Thoreau), the search for an indigenous as well as individual identity, and William James’s idea of the

⁵ See Cotkin, *Existential America* [2003], Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro’ [1957] (in Ann Charters, *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, pp.582-605), and Davis Dunbar McElroy, *Existentialism and Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963).

⁶ Cotkin, p.9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ruby Chatterji, *Existentialism in American Literature* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1983).

individual consciousness as an ‘unfinished continuum’ incapable of arriving at objectivity, provide a fertile soil for existentialist ideas.⁹

Chatterji highlights a potential intersection between American Transcendentalism and Existentialist theory, thereby suggesting a reading of American Existentialism that takes into account the tradition of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism.

While Transcendentalist writers greatly differed from one another, the touchpoints of their respective works participate in a tradition that deeply impacted nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture and literature in America.¹⁰ This approach, which simultaneously acknowledges the autarchical production of ideas of the American nation, constitutes the methodological framework of this paper.

Existentialist theory operates at the interstices between being and non-being. It focuses on the consciousness of the potentiality for annihilation of the self – a form of non-being internalised by the subject’s consciousness – that culminates, simultaneously and paradoxically, in a self-creative movement towards ultimate being. In the words of Kaufmann:

Unquestionably, the acceptance of the fact that I must die (my running ahead to my death in thought) may forcibly remind me of the limited

⁹ Ibid., pp.160-61.

¹⁰ For David Bowers: ‘Having freed itself [...] from its earlier tendencies either blindly to imitate or blindly to reject European models, American literature here for the first time sloughed off provincialism, and [...] attained, paradoxically, the rank and quality of world literature. [...] By reawakening – even among its critics – an interest in the great problems of human nature and destiny, transcendentalism conferred upon American literature a perspective far wider and deeper than that proposed by its own formulated doctrines, the perspective of humanity itself. (‘Democratic Vistas’, in *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Brian M. Barbour (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp.9-21 (pp.9-10)).

amount of time at my disposal, [...] and thus become a powerful incentive to make the most of my Being here and now.¹¹

This ontological reaction, 'mak[ing] the most of my Being here and now',¹² participates in what Existentialists have termed authenticity. In Existentialist theory, authenticity corresponds to a form of ultimate fulfillment achieved through the realisation of one's ownmost and uttermost self, in relation to the present moment. According to Jacob Golomb in his work *In Search of Authenticity*:¹³

To be authentic is to be a struggling agent trying resolutely to overcome passivity in her or his life. It is the project of winning self-possession, of creating and owning one's self within the situation as interpreted by the human agent.¹⁴

Thus Existentialist authenticity articulates an essential paradox; a paradox grounded in the premise that the very consciousness of death endows existence with a volition that generates a form of utmost being. As Golomb puts it concisely: 'In facing death one's authenticity is maximally disclosed, because the

¹¹ Kaufmann, 'Existentialism and Death', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays*, pp.193-205 (p.201).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁴ Ibid., p.124.

forces which work to suppress it are so very formidable'.¹⁵ Let's now turn to the Sartrean concepts of nothingness and engagement.

Sartre conceived nothingness as the end-product of an operation of consciousness that reflects upon the self and devises its own annihilation. It is situated in the ability of consciousness to envisage its self-negation. As McElroy explains:

[W]ith every apprehension of being, man also apprehends the possibility or 'threat' of non-being. [...] This threat of non-being puts man in a state of basal anxiety. Man is anxious because he is agonizingly aware of the threat of annihilation to his precious individuality, a threat from which there is no final and positive escape except death, the thing he most fears.¹⁶

In other words, the intrinsic threat that this nothingness poses to the self may be defined as the consciousness of death. It is a movement of consciousness that projects the possibility for one's own self to cease to be.¹⁷

Crucially, as the prospect of one's own death is internalised by consciousness, being becomes aware of its finitude, or rather, of its perimeter for action. This reaction against nothingness corresponds to the concept of Sartrean engagement; it encapsulates a forceful movement of volition towards action.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.110.

¹⁶ McElroy, p.5.

¹⁷ This implies that, for Sartre, self and consciousness cannot be equated. As Christina Howells explains: 'Sartre will argue that rather than innate, the self is an imaginary construct, outside consciousness, object not subject of consciousness, a continuous creation held in being by belief. The self or ego, the "I" and the "me", are synthetic products of consciousness, unified not unifying, transcendent not immanent'. *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.2.

For Naomi Zack:

At any rate, there is an existential return to the here and now after the realization of death's inevitability and readiness, which, assuming that one does nothing except wait for death, would seem to entail a fresh commitment to one's life, or a realignment of one's fundamental attitude towards one's life. The new upsurge (be it spontaneous or artificial) or the deliberate change in attitude, means that one [...] has more energy as an agent [...]. [T]here is very likely more freedom as an agent, and a higher value placed on freedom so that limitations on agency become less tolerable.¹⁸

Interpreted from a historical perspective, this engagement translates as a radical commitment to political and social reality. This is what makes Sartrean Existentialism, primarily, a phenomenology that attempts a confrontation with the materiality of history.

Thus for Sartre, engagement has a double function: as it seeks to oppose the emasculating effects implied by nothingness, it concomitantly creates the contents of experiences through which the individual will be able to realise his/her ownmost and uttermost self.¹⁹ In other words, Sartrean engagement is as

¹⁸ Naomi Zack, 'Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith', in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.99-109 (p.103).

¹⁹ As Mitchell Aboulafia explains: '[O]nce one becomes aware of one's relationship to [...] the power of the negative (which one has internalized and which resides in consciousness), one can act to negate aspects of the not-self, and in altering them, thereby

affirmative as it is self-generating: ‘Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is’.²⁰ It entails that, for Sartre, actions engender the self. As Golomb clarifies:

[W]e can say that actions are not actions of the self: rather, the self is a product of a series of actions. Hence it is more correct to speak of ‘actions generating me’, some of them generating me authentically, than to speak of ‘my actions’. One’s authenticity is, then, the sum total of authentic self-generating actions.²¹

The reciprocal nature of such a type of commitment to action – actions that will re-generate the self in return – corresponds to the Sartrean position of authenticity. These preliminary remarks will help us to identify the touchpoints between Sartrean Existentialism and Emersonian Transcendentalism.

In his essay ‘Nature’, Emerson focuses on the ways in which individuals both encapsulate and exemplify the essence of nature. He conceives man in relation to a greater spiritual force:

alter the horizon of one’s self’. (*The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre and Self-determination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, p.100).

²⁰ Sartre, ‘Existentialism & Humanism’, p.47.

²¹ Golomb, p.151.

Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul he calls Reason; it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men.²²

For Emerson, man is predicated by the creative spirit of nature, or ‘universal soul’.²³ According to him, all individuals partake in a greater unity that is essentially spiritual and that exemplifies a universal principle of creation.

Emerson envisions every element within the microcosm as connected to the macrocosmic principle of creation (that is, the godhead), thereby tending towards assimilation into the universal soul.

It implies that the divine is not conceived as an external and omnipotent god; rather, it is envisioned as a form of pantheist divinity that directly penetrates the here-and-now, subjects and objects, all together.²⁴ In the words of Emerson:

To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine. For the eye is fastened on the life, and slights the circumstance. Every chemical

²² Emerson, ‘Nature’, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.49.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ ‘As Charles Ellis wrote: ‘[Transcendentalism] asserts the continual presence of God in all his works, spirit as well as matter; makes religion the natural impulse of every breast; the moral law, God’s voice in every heart, independent on interest, expediency or appetite, which enables us to resist these; a universal, eternal, standard of truth, beauty, goodness, holiness, to which every man can turn and follow, if he will’. (‘An Essay on Transcendentalism’ [1842], in *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Perry Miller, New York: Doubleday, 1957, pp.21-36 (p.27)). This pantheistic form of divinity references several traditions of non-Western origin, as well as the one of eighteenth-century Romanticism.

substance, every plant, every animal in its growth, teaches the unity of cause, the variety of appearance.²⁵

These vertical transactions between nature and spirit, action and the godhead, endow Emersonian Transcendentalism with a dimension of universality.

In his essay 'History', Emerson probes the continuum previously established from nature to man, and from spirit to matter. Crucially, for Emerson man's *commitment* to the world is a function of the creative spirit of nature, which is both outside, and within him: the sum of man's actions corresponds to 'the application of [man's] manifold spirit to the manifold world'.²⁶ This means that, for Emerson, man's commitment to history is a corollary of the principle of creation that precedes him. As Larzer Ziff explains: '[...] the thought is always prior to the fact; all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws [of nature]'.²⁷ These 'laws' channel what Transcendentalists termed 'ideas', which, as Olaf Hansen explains, correspond to 'the insight that all historical processes are first of all imagined by humankind'.²⁸ This is one of the fundamentals of Emersonian Transcendentalism: philosophically anti-materialist, it establishes the primacy of spirit above matter, which achieves its actualisation in historical time through

²⁵ Emerson, 'History', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.155.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.150.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.149.

²⁸ Olaf Hansen, *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect: American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.84.

man. Such a conception denotes the fundamental idealism that lies at the core of Emersonian Transcendentalism.²⁹

The type of engagement that Emerson championed, however, is not the corollary of an ontological battle against the forces of nothingness, as it is for Sartre: it is innate, the prerogative of the spiritual principle within man. This engagement is not an outcome of ‘a power which exists [...] in time or space, but [rather of] an instantaneous in-streaming causing power’.³⁰ In other words, it originates in one’s inner nature. Crucially for Emerson, since nature incarnates the spiritual principle of creation, it is envisioned as the not-me. As he writes in ‘Nature’:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.³¹

Ontologically, this ‘not-me’ stands close to Sartre’s notion of nothingness, which in *Being and Nothingness* is interpreted as ‘an always possible nihilation of my possibles which is outside my possibilities’;³² consequently for Sartre, ‘[f]or that

²⁹ According to Ziff, ‘[Emerson’s] idealism was derived from Plato and Plotinus and was modified by Kant and his German and British Transcendental followers. It also took hints from Oriental mysticism and the doctrine of the inner light taught by George Fox and his Quaker followers’ (‘Introduction’, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, pp.7-27 (pp.24-25)).

³⁰ ‘Nature’, in *ibid.*, p.79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

³² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p.558.

reason it must arise in the world as a *Not*; it is as a Not that the slave first apprehends the master'.³³

In this context, nature is to Emersonian engagement what nothingness is to Sartrean commitment. That is to say, for Emerson nature may be conceived as the primordial negation of the self; simultaneously, it induces an existential reaction that is self-generative, as I am about to show. Nonetheless, the analogy between the Sartrean notion of nothingness and the Emersonian conception of nature can only go so far. For Sartre, nothingness is nothing but the product of reflexive consciousness: 'Consciousness is the source of negation, it derives its power to negate from nowhere outside itself'.³⁴ Whereas for Emerson the occurrence of nature within the self is not the product of self-consciousness, it is a collateral effect of the universal mind that runs through men: 'Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent'.³⁵

In effect, both Sartrean Existentialism and Emersonian Transcendentalism typify forms of engagement that are self-creative in principle. For Sartre as we have seen, an individual may achieve his/her most authentic form of fulfilment through a commitment to socio-historical reality.³⁶ As Allard Den Dulk explains, 'the individual realizes that he is both the person who acts *and* who he becomes *through that action*';³⁷ this commitment allows the self to define, and perpetually

³³ Ibid., p.70.

³⁴ Howells, p.15.

³⁵ Emerson, 'History', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.149.

³⁶ See above, pp.7-8.

³⁷ Allard Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Egger & Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p.205.

re-generate, itself. To a large extent, the imperative for self-realisation that Sartrean Existentialism champions mirrors Emerson's exhortation to fulfil the idea within the self wholly and without constraints: 'Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold in great proportions'.³⁸ This is another fundamental of Emersonian Transcendentalism: as David Bowers argues, it is grounded in

the belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization, and that self-realization, in turn, depends upon the harmonious reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies: first, the expansive or self-transcending impulse of the self, its desire to embrace the whole world in the experience of a single moment and to know and become one with that world; and second, the contracting or self-asserting impulse of the individual, his desire to withdraw, to remain unique and separate, and to be responsible only for himself.³⁹

What Bowers describes through the combination of the transcending forces of both self and individual is nothing less than the creative interplay of the spiritual principle ingrained in man – that is, the soul – and nature. Just as nature encapsulates the spiritual principle that actualises it,⁴⁰ the individual's actions in the physical world channel the realisation of his/her own self. As Richard Lehan suggests, this ontological effect of Emersonian authenticity is grounded in 'the

³⁸ Emerson, 'Nature', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.81.

³⁹ Bowers, p.17.

⁴⁰ For Emerson, 'nature is the symbol of spirit'. ('Nature', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.48.)

existential idea that man can become the product of his own mind, which leads to a form of radical individualism'.⁴¹

Although both Existentialist theory and American Transcendentalism emphasise the self-creative dimension of their respective forms of engagement, the Transcendentalist self significantly diverges from its Existentialist conception. For Emerson, the fact that engagement is predicated by the universal mind (in essence, the spirit of creation, or godhead), inevitably centers human agency.⁴² The self is revered by Emerson because it is an expression of the divine principle that is split among men: 'Of the universal mind each individual man is one more incarnation'.⁴³ Therefore for Emerson, human beings are envisioned as emanations of the divine, itself apprehended as immanent. In the words of Ziff: 'the spirit that is present behind nature does not act upon us from without but acts within us.'⁴⁴

This effect, this 'act [of nature] within the self',⁴⁵ is referred to as the 'intuition' by Emerson, which he defines as 'that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, [in which] all things find their common origin'.⁴⁶ For Robert Caponigri, 'the faculty which [intuition] symbolizes is the most direct channel between man and the realm of absolute spiritual reality'.⁴⁷ This means, from an ontological point of view, that Emersonian engagement does not rely on a

⁴¹ Richard Lehan, *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism & the Modern American Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p.148.

⁴² According to Hansen: 'Man could finally become the maker of his own self, with the aid of God, who had given up hiding behind nature and instead revealed himself in man's demiurgical abilities to abstract from nature (p.116).

⁴³ Emerson, 'History', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.150.

⁴⁴ Ziff, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, p.17.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Emerson, 'Self-reliance', in *ibid.*, p.187.

⁴⁷ Robert Caponigri, 'Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Brian M. Barbour, pp.239-56 (p.242).

strict consciousness of death, as nothingness does in the Sartrean model; rather it builds on the intuition of the principle of creation within man, which is the insight of the universal mind. As the intuition assumes a mutability that is characteristic of the eternal cycle of nature, this principle articulates the fluctuations of growth and decay *ad infinitum*,⁴⁸ thereby encapsulating endless processes of self-creation and self-destruction. Thus envisaged as the voice of the divine speaking through man's soul, the intuition is fundamental in Emersonian engagement; it corresponds to the channel through which the self may acquire the impulse to act and concomitantly re-generate itself.

As an effect, this conception of immanence collapses temporality. For Emerson: '[Man] cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time'.⁴⁹ In effect, man's time, as an exclusive function of his intuition, equates nature's; therefore, man's temporal condition must be aligned with the godhead's, in which time is but an eternal present. As Emerson explains:

Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ As Emerson illustrates it: 'For nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs is overspread with melancholy to-day' (Emerson, 'Nature', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.39).

⁴⁹ 'Self-reliance', in *ibid.*, p.189.

⁵⁰ 'Nature', in *ibid.*, p.70.

This predicament invalidates all conception of divine pre-destination forced upon the self. From an Emersonian perspective, the individual may therefore lead a completely autonomous existence, negotiating the demands of his/her own self in the succession of present moments while still being wholly related to the godhead. As Hansen puts it:

Being now is the allegorical moment of the birth of time, and all the work that goes into construction of *that* particular allegorical configuration that allows this birth to happen is part of man's assertion of his selfhood against the constraints of his past.⁵¹

Most importantly, in its enthusiasm for the achievement of an ultimate self in strict relation to a consecution of presents, Emersonian Transcendentalism anticipates the temporal parameters of Existentialist authenticity, as we have seen earlier.⁵² This correspondence of time frames has fundamental ontological implications for the nature of Transcendentalist engagement, as we are about to see.

One of the chief ontological implications of Emersonian immanence is that essence precedes existence. For Emerson: 'Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries embodies it in his language as the FATHER'.⁵³ Emerson posits a hierarchy between man's existence and the universal spirit. As Hansen points out: '[For Emerson], [h]istory, as it turns out, is

⁵¹ Hansen, p.86.

⁵² See Kaufmann's quotation above (p.5).

⁵³ Emerson, 'Nature', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.49.

a sediment, a reminder of the fact that something has taken place *before*'.⁵⁴ This conception is at odds with the Existentialism of Sartre, for whom existence precedes essence: '[Man] will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it'.⁵⁵ In other words, the divine essence of nature has no reality for Sartre; his atheistic outlook makes man's consciousness the only repository of authenticity. Sartre starts strictly from the phenomenological existence of the subject, who, through an act of consciousness, projects his/her own self outward in historical reality: '[E]xistence comes before essence – or, if you will, [...] we must begin from the subjective'.⁵⁶

Sartre, however, overlooks the implications of immanence for the self, which entail that the divine is not merely an end in itself but primarily a corollary of man's self-realisation. According to Emerson: 'Without hurry, without rest, the human spirit goes forth from the beginning to embody every faculty, every thought, every emotion which belongs to [the universal mind], in appropriate events'.⁵⁷ Crucially, such a conception of the spiritual principle ingrained in man does not cancel the autonomy of the self.⁵⁸ As Caponigri explains: 'To Emerson, the doctrine of the divinity of man could mean but one thing, the divinity of every individual and, consequently, the immediate access of every individual to the

⁵⁴ Hansen, p.83.

⁵⁵ Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p.30.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.27.

⁵⁷ Emerson, 'History', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.149.

⁵⁸ As Emerson put it: 'As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power' ('Nature', in *ibid.*, p.73).

plenitude of the divine in his own experience'.⁵⁹ Through the performance of his/her inner ideas, the individual concomitantly realises his/her ownmost self as well as the divine principle. Or, the other way round, the actions that the Transcendentalist subject performs may be read as an intrinsic realisation of the godhead.

Hence, as Emerson concludes in 'History': 'In the light of these two facts, namely, that the mind is One, and that nature is its correlative, history is to be read and written'.⁶⁰ That is to say, history is envisioned, partly, as a physical space that is a function of the universal mind; it is conceived as a mere by-product of the universal principle of creation *ingrained in man*. Hence for Emerson, history cannot be separated from the self:

The world exists for the education of each man. [...] He must sit solidly at home, and not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the government of the world; he must transfer the point of view from which history is commonly read, from Rome and Athens and London, to himself.⁶¹

This is how, for Emerson, history becomes biographical: 'We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and verifying them

⁵⁹ Caponigri, p.247.

⁶⁰ Emerson, 'History', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.171.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.152-53.

here. All history becomes subjective; in other words there is no proper history, only biography'.⁶²

As a consequence, the type of engagement that Emersonian Transcendentalism exemplifies promotes an inherent discredit of the material contingencies of history. Whereas in Sartrean Existentialism, while historical and material structures are fought against in order to reclaim a space through which the self may thrive and expand towards self-realisation, they are nonetheless acknowledged.⁶³ As Howell explains:

For Sartre the influence is two-way: history may make men, but men also make history. Individuals may not change the course of history if one takes a bird's eye, inhuman perspective [...] but they certainly affect the way it is experienced.⁶⁴

Hence in Emersonian Transcendentalism, as spirit governs matter *through man*, history becomes authorised by the universal mind. This suggests that the Transcendental self is conceived, partly and ideally, as a-historical. According to Caponigri:

The individual is freed from historical dependence and set up on the ultimate plane of Being itself. In the ultimate order of Being, his individual

⁶² Ibid., p.153.

⁶³ This is what differentiates Sartrean Existentialism from both idealism and historical materialism.

⁶⁴ Howells, p.107.

life has been orientated toward the absolute which he is admonished to recognize as his sole cause.⁶⁵

Thus, the form of engagement that this ideal, a-historical self generates extends primarily *vertically* towards the godhead. The horizontal commitment to historical reality that it simultaneously exemplifies is but an after-effect of this vertical engagement, since, for Emerson, man's actions in the world are envisaged as a sequel to the realisation of his intuition as we have seen.⁶⁶ This verticality, a direct effect of Emersonian idealism, is characteristic of a form of engagement directed towards nature and, ultimately, towards the godhead, *which is included in the self*. Ultimately then, Emersonian engagement originates in the self, and ends with the self through its highest realisation, which is spiritual in essence. This direction, which is symptomatic of forms of engagement that stem from the Transcendentalist tradition, differs from that exemplified by Sartrean engagement: Sartre promotes a commitment that is exclusively directed outwards towards historical and social reality, and which is, therefore, strictly horizontal.⁶⁷

The verticality of Transcendentalist forms of engagement highlights the concern to preserve the continuum between the self and the Godhead. In Emersonian Transcendentalism, the alignment of the self with nature – both outer and inner – is conceived as a moral injunction that vouchsafes the individual's relation to the creative principle of the universal mind, thereby allowing authentic

⁶⁵ Caponigri, p.246.

⁶⁶ This verticality is a corollary of Emersonian idealism, which postulates that ideas precede actions. See above, p.11 and p.15.

⁶⁷ Or, in the words of Sartre: 'We define man only in relation to his commitments' ('Existentialism & Humanism', p.59).

being. For Emerson: ‘Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms’.⁶⁸ Ideally then, the moral duty of man – as a microcosmic element – is to connect to the macrocosm to realise the divine nature of existence and honour the principle of creation. When this transcendental commingling fails to occur, the individual remains separate from the principle of creation, he/she cannot actualise his/her own self, and remains stuck in inauthenticity. This separation from nature results in a process of alienation in the last instance, which takes on the form of an ontological degeneration for Emerson: ‘As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident. We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God’.⁶⁹

Crucially for Emerson, the principal agent of this alienation manifests itself through the series of social mediations that are intrinsic to the predicament of modernity.⁷⁰ For Emerson, most of the social mediations are seen as crippling the connection between the individual and the universal principle: they interfere with the realisation of one’s intuitions in the physical world.⁷¹ Since they hamper the continuity between the self and the transcendent, these mediations are conceived as constraints to immediate and unconditional self-realisation.

⁶⁸ Emerson, ‘Self-reliance’, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.191.

⁶⁹ ‘Nature’, in *ibid.*, pp.73-74.

⁷⁰ As Arthur Schlesinger Jr points out, ‘transcendentalist[s] detested special groups claiming authority to mediate between the common man and the truth. [They] aimed to plant the individual squarely on his instincts, responsible only to himself and to God’ (‘Transcendentalism and Jacksonian Democracy’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Brian M. Barbour, pp.139-46 (p.139)).

⁷¹ In Emerson’s writings, the social world and the individual’s relationship to it are often treated in a contradictory fashion. In ‘Nature’ and in ‘History’, the collective of men is mostly envisaged as a community bounded by the universal mind. Whereas in other essays such as ‘Self-reliance’ for instance, the social world becomes largely problematic, as I am about to show.

In his essay 'Self-reliance', Emerson dramatises the divorce between the concept of the individual intuitively related to the godhead, and that of a social organisation that acts as a normative power:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue it most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.⁷²

In this passage, Emerson opposes an ethics of self-reliance with that of social conformity. This conformity automatically entails a loss of liberty for the self: as it tames intuitions, it restricts the individual's chances at authentic being.

Consequently, society is interpreted as a conditioning body that articulates a series of operations and interventions that, according to Emerson, work counter nature.

In its tendency to restrain and normalise one's sense of selfhood, society impedes the potentiality for authentic being from a Transcendentalist perspective. Thus Emerson warns of the dangers of society, which is seen as both profane and superfluous.

As a consequence, the type of engagement that Emersonian Transcendentalism exemplifies must be read from a double perspective: as the individual commits to the self, as we have seen earlier,⁷³ he/she simultaneously exemplifies a process of *disengagement* from the social and cultural spheres of

⁷² Emerson, 'Self-reliance', in *Ralpp Waldo Emerson*, p.178.

⁷³ See above, p.20.

influence. For Emerson, this disengagement from social reality aims to reconnect the self to the creative principle of nature. It allows the intuition to flow again through the individual so that he may re-integrate his unique position in nature and embody, in his own flesh, the universal mind by enacting his intuitions.

However, the appeal to disengage from social reality in an attempt to retrieve an instinctual self and to become one with nature is potentially self-damaging, because it is foregrounded in a self-centredness that risks becoming counter-productive for being. This is one of the most significant pitfalls of Emersonian forms of engagement: Emerson's militancy for an unrestrained expression of the self embodies a radical individualistic impetus that is non-negotiable and that borders on solipsism.

In this sense, the unrestricted, triumphant self in Emersonian Transcendentalism clashes with the imperative for social responsibility that characterises Sartrean forms of engagement: 'I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be'.⁷⁴ Whereas for Emerson, engagement is grounded in an ideal in which the individual is devised as omnipotent; one in which he/she is tempted to renounce society to cultivate his/her own relation with the divine nature of existence for better or for worse. In its disdain for social responsibility, Emersonian engagement negates Sartre's idea of an ethical counterpart to the liberty of the individual.

⁷⁴ Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', pp.32-33.

In the end, for Emerson and the American Transcendentalist tradition the pursuit of authenticity stems from a dedication to the magnificence of man's individual existence. As Emerson argues:

[T]he moment [man] acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries and customs out of the window, we pity him no more but thank and revere him; – and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor and make his name dear to all history.⁷⁵

Thus Emerson urges individuals to cultivate their ownmost nature. As he claims in 'Self-reliance': 'Insist on yourself, never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation'.⁷⁶ This type of authenticity references a militant individualism that is embodied in the values of self-reliance and anti-conformism that Emersonian Transcendentalism champions,⁷⁷ and that lays the foundations for an American variant of Existentialism. Most importantly, such a form of authenticity tends to intermingle the moral with the political: it seeks to contest all forms of institutionalised social structures inherent to historical reality that mediate the transcendental experience and tame the individual's intuition. It is through this contestation, one that strives to restore the unconditional reign of the intuitive self made supreme, that an American variant of Existentialism stemming from the tradition of Emersonian Transcendentalism may be approached.

⁷⁵ Emerson, 'Self-reliance', in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p.195.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁷⁷ From this perspective, the specific brand of idealism that Emerson promotes is compatible with the humanism of Existentialist theory.

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