

**Transatlantic Ontologies:  
From Sartre Back to Emerson, Towards an American Existentialism**

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This presentation will attempt to offer an original contribution to the definition of an American Existentialism. It will seek to delineate a type of Existentialism that is intrinsically American, in touch with its own cultural traditions and schools of thought – especially with the tradition of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, and that of Emerson in particular. In this brief presentation, I will show how Emersonian Transcendentalism both channels and transcends Sartrean Existentialist theory, beyond the structural divergences of the two theoretical models. These correlations, in turn, will be key for identifying the terms of a new form of existential authenticity that emerged in the Romantic culture of mid-nineteenth-century America.

The first question that comes to mind is, can there be such a thing as an American Existentialism? And if so, what is its nature? Walter Kaufmann – the Nietzsche critic – claimed that “American philosophy may turn out to be comparable to Roman philosophy: mainly derivative.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Kaufmann stresses the importance of the transcontinental movement of philosophy, which has undeniably paved the way for the emergence of

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: New American Library, 1976), p. 91.

Existentialist ideas in North America. Nevertheless, an appreciation of American philosophy as strictly dependent upon European sources is rather reductive: Kaufmann 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 history of its own.

In fact, this conception has been refuted by other critics – including the infamous Norman Mailer, Ruby Chatterji and George Cotkin – who claimed that “American existentialism should be seen as more than a case study in the diffusion of European ideas.”<sup>2</sup> These critics emphasised in their works the presence of idiosyncratic motifs of an Existentialist nature throughout American cultural and literary history. Chatterji pointed out the essential role that the American Transcendentalists in particular played in the dissemination of the Existentialist outlook in North America:

To some extent the American concern with the self as manifested by the Transcendentalists, the search for an indigenous as well as individual identity, and William James’s idea of the individual consciousness as an “unfinished continuum” incapable of arriving at objectivity, provide a fertile soil for existentialist ideas.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Chatterji highlights a potential intersection between American Transcendentalism and Existentialist theory; an approach that simultaneously acknowledges the autarchical production of ideas of the American nation. It is this approach that constitutes the methodological groundwork of my research.

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<sup>2</sup> George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ruby Chatterji, *Existentialism in American Literature* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1983), pp. 160-61.

But what is Existentialist theory in the first place? As hard as it may be to pack in a few sentences, we can safely say that Existentialism operates at the interstices between being and non-being. It focuses on the potentiality for death – of one’s own death; or rather, on the *consciousness* of the potentiality of one’s own death. This constitutes the paradigm for nothingness for Jean-Paul Sartre: the ability of consciousness to envisage its own negation. It is this consciousness that culminates, simultaneously and paradoxically, in a self-creative movement towards ultimate being, as the individual becomes aware of his or her finitude, or rather, of his or her perimeter for action.

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 amount of time at my disposal, . . . and thus become a powerful incentive to make the most of my Being here and now.<sup>4</sup>

This reaction against nothingness, which encapsulates a forceful movement of volition towards action, corresponds to the notion of Sartrean engagement. On the historical plane, this engagement translates as a radical commitment to social and political 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 may be able to realise his or her ownmost self. In the words of Sartre: “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the

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<sup>4</sup> Kaufmann, *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, p. 201.

sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.”<sup>5</sup> The reciprocal nature of this commitment to action – actions which, in turn, regenerate the self – corresponds to the Sartrean position of authenticity: a situation of ontological fulfilment, achieved through the realisation of one’s ownmost and innermost self, in relation to the present moment.

These preliminary remarks will help us to identify the touchpoints between Sartrean Existentialism and Emersonian Transcendentalism.

In his essay “Nature,” Emerson examines the ways in which individuals both embody and exemplify the essence of nature. For Emerson, man is predicated by the creative spirit of nature, which he terms “universal soul;”<sup>6</sup> and all individuals partake in a greater unity that is essentially spiritual and that manifests the universal principle of creation. It implies that, for Emerson, the divine is not conceived as an external and omnipotent godhead; rather, it is envisioned as a form of pantheist divinity that directly penetrates the here-and-now, subjects and objects, all together. It is both transcendent and immanent.

In the 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. In other words, man’s commitment to history is a corollary of the spiritual motive that precedes him: “The thought is always prior to the fact; all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws [of nature].”<sup>7</sup> This is one of the fundamentals of Emersonian Transcendentalism: as an idealism, it establishes the primacy of spirit above matter, which achieves its actualization in historical time through man. This is

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism & Humanism,” trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Nature & Selected Essays*, ed. L. Ziff (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), pp. 149-73 (p. 149).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, “History,” p. 149.

pivotal in Emersonianism: the fact that spirit gets actualised in social and historical reality through man.

Thus for Emerson, spirit is encapsulated in nature; and nature itself is envisioned as the ‘not-me’:

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.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, nature may be conceived as the primordial negation of the transcendental self.

In fact, we could argue that nature is to Emersonian engagement what nothingness is to Sartrean commitment. Nevertheless, the major divergence with Sartrean ontology is that for Sartre nothingness is nothing but the product of reflexive consciousness; whereas for Emerson, nothingness – which is incarnate in nature – is a collateral effect of the universal mind that runs through men. One form of nothingness – that of Sartre – is self-reflective in origin; the other – that of Emerson – intuitive: two distinct ontological modalities that will be helpful for the rest of the argument.

Meanwhile, both Sartrean Existentialism and Emersonian Transcendentalism typify forms of engagement that are, in principle, self-creative. For Sartre, an individual may achieve authenticity through a wholesome commitment to his or her concomitant socio-historical reality; a commitment that allows the individual to define, and perpetually regenerate, itself. This imperative for self-realisation, to a large extent, mirrors Emerson’s

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ‘Nature’, pp. 35-82 (p. 36).

exhortation to fulfill the idea within the self wholly and without constraints, through *intuitive actions*; actions that engender a dynamic interplay between nature and the soul, that is between outer and inner nature.

Such actions exemplify a type of engagement which is predicated by the universal mind and which inevitably centers human agency. As Larzer Ziff puts it, “the spirit that is present behind nature does not act upon us from without but acts within us.”<sup>9</sup> And this effect, this “act [of nature] within the self,”<sup>10</sup> is referred to as the “intuition” by Emerson; it corresponds to ‘the most direct channel between man and the realm of absolute spiritual reality’.<sup>11</sup> This means, ontologically, that Emersonian forms of engagement do not rely on a consciousness of death *sensu stricto*, as nothingness does in the Sartrean model; rather they build 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*, thereby encapsulating endless processes of self-creation and self-destruction all together.

Thus envisaged as the voice of the divine speaking through man’s soul, the intuition is fundamental in Emersonian engagement; it corresponds to a self-creative process which is spiritual in essence, and through which the self may acquire the impulse to act and concomitantly regenerate itself.

This conception of intuitive performativity is foregrounded in the Emersonian principle of immanence; a principle which collapses temporality. By way of immanence, man’s time, as an exclusive function of the intuition, equates that of nature; therefore, man’s

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<sup>9</sup> Larzer Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson – Nature & Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Caponigri, “Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History,” ed. by B. M. Barbour, *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (London: Notre Dame UP, 1973), p. 242.

temporal condition becomes aligned with that of the universal principle of creation – the godhead – in which time is but an eternal present, with no beginning nor end.

Not only does this predicament invalidate all conception of divine predestination forced upon the self; it also promotes a high level of autonomy, where the individual negotiates the demands of his or her own intuitive self in the succession of present moments. In this sense, Emersonian immanence anticipates the temporal parameters of Existentialist authenticity.

Nevertheless, one of the main ontological implications of this form of immanence is that essence precedes existence, since man is predicated by the creative spirit. Therefore, “history, as it turns out, is a sediment, a reminder of the fact that something has taken place *before*”;<sup>12</sup> a conception at odds with the Existentialism of Sartre, for whom existence precedes essence. Sartre starts strictly from the phenomenological existence of the subject who, through an act of consciousness, projects his or her own self outwards in historical reality. His atheistic outlook makes man’s consciousness the only repository of authenticity. 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.

Therefore, by enacting his or her intuition the individual simultaneously realises his or her ownmost and innermost self *as well as* the divine principle in historical reality. And the other way round, intuitive actions may be viewed as participating in the instantaneous accomplishment of the universal spirit of creation – the godhead – in the here-and-now.

From this perspective, history is envisioned as a physical space that is a function of the universal mind; it is conceived as a mere by-product of the creative spirit *ingrained in*

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<sup>12</sup> Olaf Hansen, *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect: American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), p. 83.

*man*. 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 here. All history becomes subjective; in other words there is no proper history, only biography.”<sup>13</sup> Here, all historical and material contingencies are discredited – reflecting the idealism of Emersonianism; whereas in Sartrean Existentialism, they are acknowledged and fought against. 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 life has been orientated toward the absolute which he is admonished to recognize as his sole cause.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, Emersonian forms of engagement extend primarily *vertically* towards the godhead, *which is included in the self*. 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 the intuition as we have seen. This direction differs from that exemplified by Sartrean forms of engagement: Sartre promotes a commitment that is exclusively directed outwards towards historical and social reality, and which is, therefore, strictly horizontal.

In the end, for Emerson as well as for the American Transcendentalist tradition to a large extent, the pursuit of existential authenticity stems from a dedication to the magnificence of man’s individual existence. As Emerson argues in “Self-reliance”:

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<sup>13</sup> Emerson, ‘History’, p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Caponigri, “Brownson and Emerson,” p. 246.



The 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.<sup>15</sup>

Such an ontological formulation results in an existential authenticity that references a militant individualism, embodied in the values of self-reliance and anticonformism championed by Emersonian Transcendentalism; an authenticity of a distinctive type which contributes to lay the foundations for a variant of Existentialism, typically American and Romantic in inspiration.

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<sup>15</sup> Emerson, “Self-reliance,” p. 195.

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