

From the American Scholar to Education: A Study of Emersonian Education Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

As an educator, Ralph Waldo Emerson was long neglected in American Education History. In fact, his philosophy of education not only influenced his contemporaries like Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller, but also had deep impact upon John Dewey's thoughts of democratic education. This paper attempts to re-interpret Emerson's philosophy of education, by means of re-reading into his two speeches respectively, namely *The American Scholar*, which is hailed as "the declaration of intellectual independence" and *On Education* afterward. Through this reexamination, the paper arrives at the conclusion that Emerson's belief in "an education as broad as man" will exert an everlasting influence upon American education history.

Keywords: Emerson, Education, Philosophy, the American Scholar

INTRODUCTION

Emerson was born into a minister's family. He became famous soon after his essay *Nature* (1836) was published, which was regarded as "romanticism in the soil of puritanism". Following speeches including *American Scholar* and *Representative Men* made him a household name and America's great thinker. At that time, Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), a well-known writer, reputed *American Scholar* (1837) as America's "Intellectual Declaration of Independence".

As a source of mental encouragement for the intellectual world then, Emerson, apart from traveling abroad and lecture tour, put much of his energy on discussing and exchanging views with younger friends like Alcott, Thoreau, and Fuller, who were members of the Transcendental Club. Meanwhile, he also paid much attention to issues, such as the Abolitionist Movement, the Women's Rights Movement and the popularization of National Education, promoted by his friend Horace Mann, "father of common school" in the US in the 1850s. It is a great pity that Emerson's contribution and impact in American Education has been long neglected until recently. As more and more scholars turn to this study, there is no doubt that his belief in "an education as broad as man" will exert an everlasting influence upon American education history.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EMERSONIAN EDUCATION THOUGHT

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803, just over two decades after the American revolution. An emerging country that has just won its freedom from the British Empire is thriving. At that time, the pride and self-confidence of the nascent nation has already emerged in politics, economy, culture and other fields. Politically, Jackson, a "grassroots" President from the west, inherited and carried forward Jefferson's democratic ideas. "The virtues and abilities of ordinary people were extolled as never before," because "Jackson trusted their common sense and intuitive judgment."¹ After the abolition of qualification on the voters' property in the Midwest, the public's political participation was greatly enhanced, and this enthusiasm to actively participate in the democracy construction, in turn, promoted the rapid economic development.

Economically, the United States has a large natural market, abundant labor resources and unique advantaged environment. In 1816, the idea of "taking agriculture as the nation's foundation" in Jefferson's time underwent a fundamental

¹Qian Mansu, *Emerson and China: Reflections on Individualism*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1996, p.44.

change, which turned to taking industry and commerce as its cornerstone. Therefore, in order to protect the development of national industries, the United States began to impose tariff barriers to prevent British and European products from entering the country. Under all these favorable conditions, America's industrial revolution flourished. In fact, New England, located in the northeast of the United States, not only has long been the political and economic center of many countries, but also takes a leading position all the time in regard to science, culture and education.

Even before the revolution, Boston and Philadelphia in New England were already the political and cultural centers of 13 north American states, and their cultural and educational levels were far higher than those of other regions. When it came to Jackson's reform, with the rapid development of economy, the public welfare undertakings had made amazing achievements. It was no wonder that reformers believed that a series of moral and social problems arising along with economic development could all be corrected and remedied by an increasingly sophisticated legal system as well as fair and impartial administrative measures—"they were in line with the humanitarian spirit, with a naive optimism to proceed all aspects of social reform, holding that they would soon be able to remove all the obstacles to human progress, and build a perfect state as the model of the world."² And the first step of social reform, in their view, was to inherit the ideological legacy of the early puritans and to initiate education, especially to promote free public education, holding that it is the best way to let the individuality develop freely, and finally reduce or eliminate the gap between social classes. Only under such historical background, the study of the formation of Emerson's educational thought is more practically significant.

From the above summary of Emerson's life and the background of his educational thought, it can be seen that Emerson's educational thought is the inheritance and crystallization of cultural heritage, going in line with his transcendentalism and individualism, which is his lifetime belief. Transcendentalism emphasizes individual experience as well as individual self-transcendence. When reflected in education, they naturally evolved into believing personal potential and talent, which has far-reaching significance for

²Qian Mansu, *Emerson and China: Reflections on Individualism*, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1996, p.49.

spreading the democratic ideals of freedom and equality as well as democratization processes in not only the United States but also the whole world.

If dialectics is reckoned as the essence of Hegel's philosophy and is ubiquitous, individualism is undoubtedly a main line running through the development of Emerson's complex thought. Even his transcendentalism is essentially a transcendence of personal experience or ego. Consistent with his philosophy, his educational thought is, in essence, full development and display of individuality.

On the question of the nature of man, Emerson believed that "man is endogenous, and that education is his manifestation"—the individuality, in his view—"the right ethics are central, and the soul develops outward"³ seemed to be a modern version of Plato or Plotinus theory. Like the enlightenment thinkers of the 17th century, he firmly believed that all men had divine reasons which made them above all creatures, and that even they themselves, had a quality that could be considered close to god, namely divinity. As he put it in his speech, "Man being the end is his highest end."⁴ God sends every little life into the world, Emerson said, carrying around a certain desire to realize certain divinity, so that it may be said that every man in the world is a genius. As if it were an embryo, as he later described, all can be done was to wait patiently, as if waiting for nature to blossom and bear fruit, which may be "the charm of life"⁵, as he declared.

In another famous speech, *Self-Reliance* (1841), Emerson made it clear that the power contained in a man was in fact so new that no one but him knew what he was capable of, and not even he himself knew it. It may sound unrealistic that geniuses are not necessarily aware of their gifts. Yet perhaps this is true for most people. Emerson's definition of genius as "you think deep down that what is right for you is right for everyone" is clearly somehow egoistic. However, this definition has certainly put personal value above the collectivity—the church, the state and all kinds of social organization. If the Renaissance emancipated man

³Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, p.679.

⁴Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.204.

⁵Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.136.

from the oppression of god in the nineteenth century, with the efforts of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other thinkers, people had been raised to almost equal status with god.

Since each individual might be a genius, each educate should be respected. It also became one of Emerson's important education discoveries: "The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil."⁶ This respect not only means the respect of the personality, but the respect in dealing with relations between teaching and learning: not to teach him what you want to instruct, but to teach him what would be acceptable in his nature, suitable for his development, because "each individual must be taught anew"⁷, which coincides with "teach students in accordance with their aptitude", the education thoughts of Confucius in ancient China.

THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR AND "MAN THINKING"

As an educator, Ralph Waldo Emerson's reputation apparently cannot be compared with Rousseau or Locke, who both have specific theses on education. Emerson's popularity in education even lags behind John Dewey though the latter's thoughts of democratic education are to a great extent under his influence. Be that as it may, as an ideologist and cultural giant of high prestige in America, Emerson presents completely new philosophy of education in *The American Scholar*, which is hailed as "the declaration of intellectual independence". His education ideas not only have widespread and profound influence at that time, but also on later generations.

In *The American Scholar*, Emerson proudly declares that "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close."⁸ Being in such a historic transformation period, American scholars are sure to undertake the historical mission of carrying forward the cause pioneered by their predecessors and forging ahead into the future. It is the demand of the times that American scholars discard old stereotypes to explore new ways.

To achieve such lofty ideals, American scholars, the "Man Thinking", must be good learners because

⁶Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.141.

⁷Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.126.

⁸Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, p.62.

they themselves represent knowledge. Emerson believes nature is the first thing people need to learn from, to learn "nature's influences upon the mind."⁹ To better understand nature's active role in mind (spirit), he further elaborated that "the simple perception of nature forms is a delight."

For social phenomena like materialism and compromise of morality with rapid economic development, Emerson sharply pointed out: "To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone."¹⁰ Obviously along with romantics, Emerson firmly believes that people will only realize their own significance and rediscover themselves in nature's eternal solemn silence.

But such sensible beauty is only the minimum part of nature because "The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection." The pure beauty is actually "in combination with the human will", or in brief "Beauty is the mark that God sets upon virtue."¹¹ Here Emerson apparently follows the old path that Kant and Hegel once pursued. People are even vaguely conscious of Chinese Taoism in his speeches about nature.

In addition to above two factors, Emerson then combine the beauty of nature with mind; that is to turn nature into "an object of the intellect". He proposes that the beauty of nature "remain for the apprehension and pursuit of the intellect". Only on this level will "Art" be created. Hence one can see that the beauty of nature is strongly interlinked with morality, thought and art. In the final analysis, "Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess." In this way, "the ancient precept, 'know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."¹²

⁹Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, p.64.

¹⁰Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, pp.65-77.

¹¹Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, pp.15-17.

¹²Joel Porte ed., *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, translated by Zhao Yifan et al, Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1993, p.66.

Emerson once complained that his parents gave him poor health, but it did not stop him being an advocator of action. The most pioneering contribution he makes concerning education in *The American Scholar* is, undoubtedly, to propose for the first time the importance of “action” for learning. Though it is maybe secondary for scholars, Emerson regards it as a necessary capability. The metaphor Emerson here employs, “...by which (action) experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin,” is quoted frequently by educators in later generations.

There is another highly acclaimed metaphor from Emerson. “Life is a dictionary.” —Clearly “to learn from life” nowadays sounds like cliché, however, when Emerson puts forward the proposal, theological thought of Calvinism is yet to be completely eliminated, in view of which this proposal apparently is very astounding and soul-stirring—to smash the spiritual shackles of theology since Middle Ages and free people from the bond. People could then turn their attention to, or become focused on, their worldly life. From the perspective of general education, it is an apt appraisal to call Emerson the American’s prophet in the 19th century.

ON EDUCATION AND THE VALUE OF EMERSONIAN EDUCATION THOUGHT

The opposite side of the educational concept of respecting individual values and promoting individualism is to stifle and destroy the creativity of individuals, making them flinch and hesitate to move forward. In his essay *On Education* (1876), Emerson passionately called on every teacher to reward maverick students, even to embrace those who dare to point out the teacher’s mistakes. In the passage of “Law of the Mind”, he severely criticized the brutal teaching methods at that time: “Don’t detain the young people in the pews against their will”—it was literally physical punishment and abuse for the young students and “Don’t go against children’s will and ask them questions for an hour.”¹³

The natural mechanism is supposed to unfold in an orderly and rational way with age. Emerson also gave students some advice: believe in the potential within each person and don’t imitate

¹³Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Lectures*, translated by Sun Yixue, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2004, p. 298.

others, because God created each person with different gifts. It was in this sense that Emerson appealed to the graduates of the theological seminary, and indeed to the entire American people, that “envy equals ignorance, imitation equals suicide”—it may be a little overzealous and biased, but considering the situation at that time, how could the public be aroused and alarmed without such an effort?

The disadvantages American education in the mid-nineteenth century are not only outdated teaching content, fogyish teaching methods, but a large deviation from Emersonian ideal in terms of education purpose, “we are committed to make accountants, lawyers and engineers”, he was sorry to say, “rather than to cultivate people of outstanding talent, enthusiasm, and great minds.”¹⁴ The purpose of education is originally to be consistent with the purpose of life. It must be moral. One must be taught to be confident and self-supporting, to understand the nature and to know himself, not merely to learn the means of making a living. As he says, it is only when a man, whether he is a child or a youth, has developed an interest and curiosity in nature or society, that this force will cause him to keep pushing forward until he achieves success, as Confucius said, “A gentleman is not a utensil.”—and this is “Education should be as broad as man”¹⁵.

In addition, Emerson also vigorously emphasized the importance of labor in education, advocating that labor, especially physical labor, should be part of the education of young people. His argument was that, since the physical labor of a society was to be performed by all its members, it was a right that no one should be deprived of, and that “the function of physical labor is never out of date and applies to every person. He even gave specific advice that “for the sake of self-cultivation, one should have a farm or learn a craft”—as he himself, or his friend Thoreau, had done. Such work is “not only wholesome, but also instructive”. Therefore, he claimed, no one should abdicate his duty, “for the reason that labor is the education of God to man.”¹⁶ This

¹⁴Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.134.

¹⁵Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.133.

¹⁶Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Lectures*, translated by Sun Yixue, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2004, pp.232-235.

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educational concept was widely divergent from the traditional “gentleman’s education”, which also showed Emerson’s foresight.

In “On Education”, Emerson also expressed the idea that children’s education should be paid by the government. Although this was the consistent proposition of Calvinism and New England puritans, because of the advocate of Emerson and Horace Mann, it greatly promoted for the educational innovation at that time. At the end of his speech, Emerson also suggested that teachers learn from the way mothers raise babies, emphasizing teaching for fun, so that teachers and students enjoy mutual delight in teaching and learning. Such an educational idea, based on careful observation and experience of human nature, shows Emerson’s keen and extraordinary insight as an educational thinker.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it is certain to declare that Emerson’s great contribution to American education thought is noteworthy. In a word, as Emerson said, “The most glorious enterprise in

the world, is the upbringing of a man.”¹⁷ Education should be the highest and greatest cause of mankind, because it is closely linked not only with the destiny of people themselves, but also with the destiny of the society and the nation. In this sense, Emerson was convinced that the cause could be achieved only through education.

Hegel once asserted in his “philosophy of history” that whatever people there are, there is a corresponding form of government. Education thinkers throughout the ages had also paid attention to the relationship between national education and social improvement, such as American educator John Dewey at the beginning of the 20th century, who had inherited and developed the Emersonian thought of democratic education, which resulted in tremendous achievements in economical and cultural aspects in the American society—perhaps, this is the reason why people should study the historical and practical significance of Emersonian education thought up to day.

¹⁷Howard Mumford Jones, ed., *Emerson on Education*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966, p.204.

Citation: Yang Yiyi, Yang Jing, “From the American Scholar to Education: A Study of Emersonian Education Philosophy”, *Annals of Language and Literature*, 4(1), 2020, pp 27-31.

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