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Between Aloofness and Americanness: A Comparative Study of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mark Twain

Kaori HOSONO

Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) have been considered by many to be totally different in character, although both of them are authors of canonical nineteenth-century American texts. In addition to their generational difference, they also had very different upbringings. Twain was born in the countryside of Missouri as a slave-holder's son, worked in his early teens as an apprentice, and achieved fame as a man from the wilds of the Far West. Emerson, in contrast, was born in Boston as a son of a Unitarian minister, studied at Harvard, energetically delivered lectures, and left scores of essays as a social critic and a leader of the Transcendentalism movement in New England. Despite these differences, however, they also share something in common, and this involves their representations of "Americanness." This article provides an argument for their dis/similarity through the analysis of "aloofness" in Emerson's "The American Scholar" (1837) and Twain's writings about the West.

Twain delivered a speech at John Greenleaf Whittier's 70th birthday celebration in 1877, forty years after Emerson's lecture at the Phi Beta Kappa Society which is well known under the title "The American Scholar." Introduced by William Dean Howells as a young writer from the Western frontier, Twain made his debut at the Saturday Club in 1871, a literary circle which Emerson and other Eastern-American "men of letters" belonged to. In his speech, Twain told the story of Western swindlers whom he encountered "at a miner's lonely log cabin in the foot-hills of the Sierras" thirteen years prior (695). They assume the roles of the stars of the Eastern literary circles, including Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. At the beginning of the funny anecdote, Twain stresses the contrast between the East and the West: “Standing here on the shore of the Atlantic and contemplating certain of its largest literary billows, I am reminded of a thing which happened to me thirteen years ago, when I had just succeeded in stirring up a little Nevadian literary puddle myself, whose spume-flakes were beginning to blow thinly Californiaward” (695). The words “the shore of the Atlantic” and “Californiaward” shed light on the contrast between the East coast and the West coast, and Twain’s past and present as well, for this anecdote is not so much a hoax as his own “history” (695).

In the speech, Twain makes fun of three “littery people” (697), making a pun in exchanging “littery” for “literary.” For example, he depicts the “fake” Emerson as “a seedy little bit of a chap” (695) and quotes from his five poems “Mithridates,” “Concord Hymn,” “Brahma,” “Song of Nature,” and “Monadnoc.” Twain makes a bold attempt of showing his individuality and his characteristics as a Western humorist on this occasion, only to offend the attendees, mostly composed of writers who adhered to the Eastern genteel tradition. Worried about the consequences of his speech, Twain took Howells’s advice and sent apologetic letters to the three writers at a later date:

> I come before you, now, with the mien & posture of the guilty—not to excuse, gloss, or extenuate, but only to offer my repentance. If a man with a fine nature had done that thing which I did, it would have been a crime—because all his senses would have warned him against it beforehand; but I did it innocently & unwarned. I did it as innocently as I ever did anything. You will think it is incredible; but it is true, & Mr. Howells will confirm my words. . . . I do not ask you to forgive what I did that night, for it is not forgivable; I simply had it at heart to ask you to believe that *I am only heedlessly a savage*, not premeditatedly; & that I am under as severe punishment as even you could adjudge to me if you were required to appoint my penalty. (Clemens n. pag.; emphasis added)

Twain uses the excuse that he meant no harm at the dinner party, with special emphasis on the fact that he was “only heedlessly a savage” from the Western frontier. This episode has been considered to be the most important event which symbolizes the difficulty of Western writer Twain’s entry into the Eastern literary scene.

The relationship between Eastern and Western literature has been interpreted in terms of an antagonistic configuration. For instance, Joseph Coulombe indicates that Eastern writers including Emerson feared that their Eastern literature may have been lacking in masculinity.[1] Indeed, Emerson thought ill of the Western pioneers, perhaps for this reason. In *The Conduct of Life* (1860), he describes the forty-niners who participated in the California Gold Rush as follows: “I do not think very respectfully of the designs or the doings of the people who went to California in 1849. It was a rush and a scramble of needy adventurers, and in the Western country, a general jail delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers” (1084). What I would like to emphasize is that at the time of 1877, Emerson was an authority to be conquered for Twain who had settled down in Eastern literary circles, and this led him to deliver such an adventurous speech on Whittier’s birthday.

Nevertheless, a closer look at Emerson’s words and deeds, especially throughout the 1830-40s, shows us that he had a tendency to distance himself from any kind of authoritative position. His aloofness in this respect can be seen in his well-known speech “The American Scholar.” Dating back 40 years prior to Twain’s bitter experience, Emerson gave a speech to Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society on August 31, 1837, titled “An Oration, Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge,” as a replacement for the original lecturer. The speech is now known as “The American Scholar,” in which Emerson holds up an ideal of scholars, especially “men of letters.” He insists that scholars should learn from nature, master books by judging for themselves, take action in society, and experience a variety of things. This is the ideal person for Emerson, the perfect human being as a “Man Thinking,” filled with “Self-Reliance.” Lowell praised this speech as “an event without any former parallel in our literary annals” (366), and Holmes astutely interpreted it as their “intellectual Declaration of Independence” (88). Since then, Emerson’s lecture has been esteemed with an emphasis on its nationalistic character.

Actually, however, America’s parting and independence from the Old World is not the main point of this speech, and instead Emerson consistently focuses on the general ideal of scholars. Lawrence Buell criticizes Holmes’s understanding as “too sweeping and too narrow” (44).[2] A careful inspection of the situation surrounding Emerson at that time makes it clear that he tried to stay out of any organization, including national, regional, university, or ideological associations. According to Kenneth S. Sacks, Emerson’s repulsion toward Harvard University's policies at that time led him to discuss the way he thought a scholar should be in "The American Scholar." As is well known, though it was his alma mater, Emerson's idea came to be incompatible with Harvard's elitism and the conservative Unitarianism of the Department of Theology. In addition, he was disappointed by John Thornton Kirkland's resignation from the presidency and deeply opposed the new president Josiah Quincy III who was an ex-assemblyman, and strongly disagreed with his educational policy which belittled academism.[3]

Moreover, Emerson had distanced himself from the Transcendentalists, even though he had previously played a leading role in their community. For instance, he chose not to take part in the establishment of the Brook Farm in 1840, and this has been regarded as a beginning of the Transcendentalists' internal division. But Sacks suggests that an even earlier sign of such division can be seen in "The American Scholar." In composing the speech, Emerson did not listen to the opinions of other Transcendentalists in their suggestions that he should refer to the character distinctive of Americans, and instead maintained an attitude of neutrality in discussing the image of an ideal scholar. In short, "[Emerson] not only defied the Unitarian call for elite leadership of American culture. He also refused to ally himself fully with those Transcendentalists who believed in popular sovereignty" (Sacks 31).

Emerson also had misgivings about the radicalism of the Young America movement and assumed a critical position toward Manifest Destiny, a position which John O'Sullivan had supported.[4] In December of 1847, he was dismissive about the patriotism which was fundamental to the ideology of Manifest Destiny in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, saying, "We hesitate to employ a word so much abused as patriotism, whose true sense is almost the reverse of its popular sense. We have no sympathy with that boyish egotism hoarse with cheering for our side, for our State, for our town; the right patriotism consists in the delight which springs from contributing our peculiar and legitimate advantages to the benefit of humanity" ("To the Public" 343).This account proves Emerson's evasion of affiliation with any organizations which may induce exclusiveness. His ideal was something more universal, "the benefit of humanity."

Contrary to its reputation as the "American intellectual Declaration of Independence," it turns out that the "The American Scholar" was an attempt to break away from the tradition of the Old World, the independence of the culture of Emerson's land, and the need to demonstrate any specific ideology. But perhaps more importantly, it was also the realization of a higher ideal. This does not mean that Emerson ignored the importance of American cultural independence. Rather, it is true that the future of the United States was of great concern to him as stated in his later works, even though he distanced himself from any particular allegiances. At the end of "The American Scholar," Emerson expresses his concern about the contemporary restriction of speech through which individual opinions were inevitably absorbed into some parties or sections, especially the North or the South, and insists that each person should have their own policy and proclaim it:

> Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; not to be reckoned one character; not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south? Not so, brothers and friends,—please God, ours shall not be so. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. ("The American Scholar" 91-92)

Thus, a close examination shows that Emerson refrained from being embroiled in any specific "party "or "section." In that case, the meaning of the adjective "American" in "The American Scholar" becomes rather vague. Either way, it is rather ironic to think that Emerson, who had shunned belonging to any allegiances, became a leading figure in the Eastern literary circle after the Civil War and that this upset Twain, who was a newcomer from the Western frontier. The episode on Whittier's birthday hints that there is a cycle whereby a proudly independent reformist is transformed into a conformist as time goes by.[5] Actually, the confrontational relationship between Western writer Twain and the writers in the Eastern literary circles including Emerson has in fact been underscored in discussions on Whittier's birthday celebration as a result.[6]

However, there was more to follow this episode. Emerson's daughter Ellen wrote to Twain's wife Olivia that when Twain made his speech, Emerson left his seat and reported to have been amused while listening to the event the following day (LeMaster 249). Ellen added that Twain's *Innocents Abroad* (1869) was her father's favorite work. Contrary to the apparent conflict between them, it is also true that Emerson and Twain shared some common traits. For example, both of them gained fame as lecturers and made provincial tours. Yet their commonness was not only with respect to their lecturing activities. In a way, Twain practiced what Emerson preached as an ideal of understanding. In the preface of *Innocents Abroad*, Twain declares that he will not be a slave to the conventional style of travel literature, and will instead see "with his own eyes" without being misled by forerunners:

> Yet notwithstanding it is only a record of a pic-nic, it has a purpose, which is to suggest to the reader how he would be likely to see Europe and the East if he looked at them with his own eyes instead of the eyes of those who traveled in those countries before him. I make small pretense of showing anyone how he ought to look at objects of interest beyond the sea—other books do that, and therefore, even if I were competent to do it, there is no need. (n. pag.)

Tony Tanner expounds that Huck, who stares in wonder at the world, inherits his "eyes" from Emerson, when he says, "Huck articulates that recovered wonder which Emerson prescribed and Clemens mourned for in *Life on the Mississippi*: he wonders at the usual and in so doing makes the usual wonderful" (125). In his memoirs, Twain describes in detail the way he acquired skills in pilotage by reading the surface of the river, and his attitude corresponds with the one of Emerson's ideal scholar who learns from nature.[7]

To be more precise, the apparently confrontational relationship between Emerson, the Eastern writer, and Twain, the Western writer, is open to question. To begin with, Emerson thought that Western culture gave American literature its originality. According to Robert D. Richardson Jr., after moving back from England in 1833, Emerson went on a lecture tour in Ohio, which was the first trip to "the West" for him. He then extended his journey to Kentucky and Illinois and was deeply moved by seeing Mississippi river: He portrayed it as "the loveliest river, no towns, no houses, no dents in the forest, no boats almost. We met, I believe but one steam-boat in the first hundred miles"(*Letters* 210). Since then, Emerson returned to the West nearly every year on his lecture tours (Richardson 478-81), though when Emerson finally paid a visit to California, it was not until his later years in 1871 (Fresonke 127). In 1842, he points out that Western literature has great potential in establishing a national literature:

> Our eyes will be turned westward, and a new and stronger tone in our literature will be the result. The Kentucky stump-oratory, the exploits of Boone and David Crockett, the journals of the Western pioneers, agriculturalists, and socialists, and the letters of Jack Downing, are genuine growths, which are sought with avidity in Europe, where our European-like books are of no value. (“Europe and European Books” 1250)

David Reynolds’s assumption that Emerson adopted Western humor in his rhetoric in order to attract the attention of readers and spectators supports this point. He argues that Emerson derives his inspiration for the all-too-famous metaphorical expression in *Nature*, “a transparent eye-ball” (Fig.1) from Western hoaxes in which the image of gouging out eyes appears.[8] Emerson also uses the expression of “monsters” who “suffered amputation from the trunk” in discussing the entirety of human being in “The American Scholar,” which also originates from sensational Western tales (Reynolds 493): “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (“The American Scholar” 74). This is only a hypothesis by Reynolds, but it is greatly indicative that “a transparent eye-ball,” the symbolic motif of Transcendentalism, originates from an essential element of the Western frontier spirit. Both Transcendentalism and the Western frontier spirit emphasize the importance of the desire to expand oneself. While he did not support the idea of Manifest Destiny, Emerson was

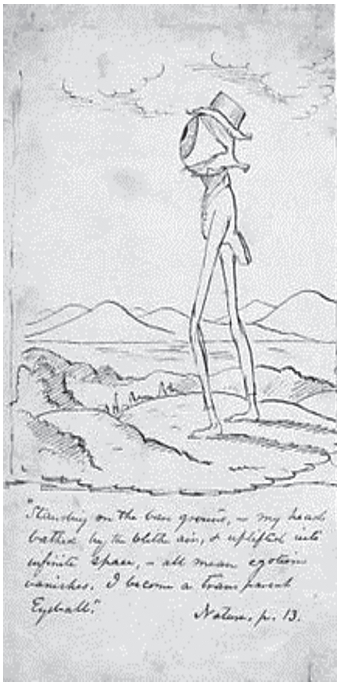
“Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, & uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent Eyeball.”
Nature, p. 13.

Fig.1 “The transparent eyeball” illustrated by Christopher Pearse Cranch, ca.1836-38 still fascinated by the Western virgin land and expected the future of the United States to be situated there, as Richardson indicates: “It [The West] continued to grow on him and soon became a major counterweight to old England in his imagination” (481) after his first visit to the Midwest.

Emerson’s resonance with expansionism can be explained by Kris Fresonke’s idea of the American consciousness of “design,” which he defines as “the tendency of thought that reads aesthetic qualities and divine volition in the orderly appearance of the world” (4). The idea of design, which was a significant part of the national theology in the eighteenth century, came to be a basic element of Christian education in the early nineteenth century. At the same time, the idea resonated with national political ambitions of magnification as Fresonke astutely observes: “America is an argument from design: America looks American, and its appearance lets us infer God’s designs for its settlement by Americans” (5). The nature of Western virgin land was considered to be indicative of design. Thus, for Fresonke, Meriwether Louis and William Clark’s Western expedition was a trial to find divine design in the untrodden Western landscape, and “exploration narratives . . . pass on the possibilities of national design to Emerson” (31). Somewhat different from Manifest Destiny’s devouring ambition, the ideology of design in the nineteenth century was a religious one: “His strategy was to identify and glorify design—the theological argument that infers a divine purpose from local observations of nature—and to carefully protect it from Jacksonian design, or what would eventually be called manifest destiny” (115).[9] Emerson criticized the forty-niners, not for their Western savageness, but for the shallowness of their motives, since they went West for their own interests. While he disdained economical or political motives, however, Emerson shared Manifest Destiny’s desire for expansion, in a sense that he was also looking for divine design in the Western landscape. His bitter attack on the forty-niners as expressed when he said “I do not think very respectfully of the designs or the doings of the people who went to California in 1849” precisely targets their religiously wrong “designs.”

When he first visited the Midwest, Emerson wrote that people in St. Louis could “already smell the Pacific” (*Journals* 522). For him, St. Louis, located in the Midwest, was a distant Western land that had realized divine design. But for Samuel Clemens, under the alias Mark Twain who was raised in Hannibal, about 100 miles further up Mississippi river from St. Louis, Emerson’s ideal West was only an inevitable fact of life, and this is true of the supposed Far West. Twain, who moved to the Far West twelve years after the gold rush, did not take on a mission of sanctified development or the pursuit of design. Proving no exception to the rule, he went out into the new world searching for livelihood like the "needy adventurers" Emerson criticized. In his second travel narrative *Roughing It* (1872), Twain depicts how he had a hard time in his Western life. But he did not simply describe the reality of his life in the barren land in the travelogue.[10] While Twain does convey the bitter side of Western life in *Roughing It*, he also reproduces the ideal West which Emerson and other Easterners had dreamed of. For instance, at the beginning of the travelogue, the narrator (the young Clemens) envies his brother Orion who is appointed as the Secretary of Nevada Territory and imagines the dazzling adventure in the West:

> I never had been away from home, and that word "travel" had a seductive charm for me. Pretty soon he [Orion] would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West, and would see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures, and may be[sic] get hanged or scalped, and have ever such a fine time, and write home and tell us all about it, and be a hero. And he would see the gold mines and the silver mines, and maybe go about of[sic] an afternoon when his work was done, and pick up two or three pailfuls of shining slugs, and nuggets of gold and silver on the hillside. And by and by he would become very rich, and return home by sea, and be able to talk as calmly about San Francisco and the ocean, and "the isthmus" as if it was nothing of any consequence to have seen those marvels face to face. (19)

What matters here is that Twain wrote this work almost ten years after visiting the Far West, and so the travelogue is considerably embroidered. As Coulombe points out, "Despite his success in the West, Twain was largely ambiguous about the territory, and his private and public writings revealed him struggling to integrate diverse regional conventions into a public persona that would facilitate his departure from the West as well as maintain his popularity in a new region with an expanded audience" (2). In other words, Twain skillfully selects, fabricates, and exaggerates episodes in composing his travelogue, in order to appeal to

Eastern readers as a Western writer. The naive narrator is the reflection of Easterners including Emerson, who find ideal design in Western soil. Though he experienced the Western desolateness first hand, Twain presents what Easterners want to see, that is, the Western landscape upon which is inscribed the holy design, as if a shaman summoned a phantom. Indeed, the West was a mere “costume” (Coulombe 21) for Twain, which facilitated his entry into the Eastern literary circle as one of the men from the wilds of the Far West.

Twain moved around all over the country throughout his lifetime. Born in Missouri, the border state of the Midwest, he moved to the Far West, gained fame as a Western humorist, made his debut in the Eastern literary circle, and became a leading figure in his literary field in his later years, similar to the trajectory of Emerson. In this sense, each time he moved, he renewed his identity, acting as a slave holder’s son, an apprentice, a pilot, a volunteer soldier of the Confederate States, a humorous journalist/lecturer from the Far West, and a humanitarian writer who represents nineteenth-century America. His enduring identity, evident in the kind of aloofness that he conveyed, enabled him to rise to the top and be a representative American writer. At a time of great internal migration, he made journeys around the world and left behind many travel books which made him a famous writer and lecturer.

There is an explicit difference between Emerson, who found a national ideal in the Far West, and Twain, who faced the reality of the West and moved to the East. But at the same time, we can discern a common aloofness between them. While Huckleberry Finn’s narrative of escape from civilization has been regarded as one of the origins of modern American literature, Emerson’s rejection of any allegiances in “The American Scholar” paradoxically generates the text’s Americanness. As stated above, Emerson’s ideal in “The American Scholar” has no element particular to America. Still, his aloofness itself solidifies the Americanness of Emerson’s idealistic scholar, and this is also a commonality between him and Twain, who have been regarded as writers with contrasting characters representing both the East and the West. Furthermore, the rejection of allegiances leads to an attitude of denying one’s present position and heading for another new world, and this same underlying desire for expansion is conveyed in both Emerson’s and Twain’s works. Aloofness and the lust for enlargement combine together, and this paradox forms the basis of the American consciousness.

Notes

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[1] Coulombe explains the hostility of Eastern writers toward Western literature as follows: “Whereas writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson had worried about writers being viewed as feminine, Twain actively exploited regional and masculine ideals to define language and its users according to new male expectations” (48).

[2] Buell also indicates that it is failure to interpret Emerson’s work from the framework of “Americanness,” considering his interrelationship with intellectuals in Europe: “The point of stressing his cross-border appeal in and beyond his own time is to underscore that his vision and standing were not reducible to his ‘Americanness’”(48). As for transnational aspects of classic American literature, see Giles, “Transnational and Classic American Literature” pp. 62-77.

[3] See Sacks, pp. 33-36.

[4] In his work *Young America*, Widmer clearly indicates that “Emerson was distressed by the New York Democracy, thinking them ‘destructive, not constructive’” (68).

[5] The same cycle can be found in the history of ideas in seventeenth to nineteenth century America. David Reynolds and Perry Miller indicate that the root of Transcendentalism can be found in the Antinomianism. Considering the fact that Antinomianism had been condemned as heretic, it is highly suggestive that transcendentalism, which was the central idea of American Renaissance, took over its essence.

[6] See Frank L. Mott, pp. 59-60.

[7] Twain’s description of “river-reading techniques” is worth quoting: “The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book—a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. . . . There never was so wonderful a book written by man; never one whose interest was so absorbing, so unflagging, so sparklingly renewed with every re-perusal” (118).

[8] Reynolds argues that Emerson acquired a closer acquaintance with Western literature: “When Emerson declared that Americans should look to ‘the exploits of Boone and David Crockett’ to discover ‘a new and stronger tone in our literature,’ he may have been referring to the thoroughly American experiments with theme and language that the Crockett almanacs represented. . . . If Crocket gouged out other people’s eyes and carried them in his pocket, Emerson metaphorically transformed himself into a walking transparent eyeball. In a more general sense, the Crockett almanacs and Emerson’s writings were different products of the American writer’s instinct to exaggerate democratic individualism in both theme and

language" (450-51).

9 For the relation between Puritan faith and advances into the New World, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*.

10 Bruce Michelson comments that in the West, journalists were required not to report a mere event but to show inventive hoaxes: "In the Territory, reporting is the plausible telling of 'stretchers'; a newspaper here is only as good as the lies it can make this world believe" (69). Twain fostered his skill of "lying plausibly" as a newspaper writer and made use of it in writing *Roughing It* and other travel narratives.

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