American Transcendentalists Adoption
of Eastern Symbolism

Yohanna I. Meray, yomeray@gmail.com
Dr. Cand. Universitas Gadjah Mada
Universitas Negeri Manado

Abstract

This paper is mainly intended to discuss the appreciation of American transcendentalists to Eastern symbolism. Adopted Eastern symbolism in their works Emerson and Poe (transcendentalists) contribute in creating American cultural identity. Applied interdisciplinary approach which involve literature, philosophy, religion, and history, the writer attempts to show that Eastern symbolism had been widely accepted and had been transformed into the spirit of transcendentalism.

Key Words: Eastern symbolism, transcendentalism, Emerson, Poe.

Introduction

Far before Eastern immigrant came to practice their culture in America, Eastern symbolism has attracted American transcendentalist authors’ attention during the nineteenth-century. Having got influence from Eastern symbolism mentioned as Bhagavat Gita and Moslem mysticism, Emerson and Poe proclaim themselves as transcendentalists. They admired Eastern symbolism in their works, as they manifested Eastern symbolism at the same time they create multicultural scenes that contribute to the development of American multiculturalism.

Starting from Eastern symbols, the smallest element of culture, the writer intends to discuss the contribution of Eastern and Western symbolism in creating American multiculturalism.

To discuss deeply the work of Eastern and Western symbolism to the formation of American multiculturalism, the writer needs to introduce Cassirer’s
definition of symbol. Human beings according to Cassirer (1994: 25) live in symbolical world who continuously create symbols. Language, myth, arts, and religion are the product of man’s creativity that form complicated webs of symbols of human experiences. Led by his creativity, man constructed groups of society from which appeared sociological patterns such as status, norms, manner, and social systems that produce what man called culture (Spradley, 1972). Culture in this sense according to Geertz contains concepts of meaning which are transmitted historically and manifested in symbolical words. Inherited abundance system of concepts which are expressed in a form of symbol, human beings use them as a means to communicate, to devote, and to develops their knowledge and attitude towards life (Banton, 3).

As a nation of immigrants the Americans actively practices pluralism symbols. They do appreciate the heterogeneity of their cultural symbols. All religions, Christian, Buddhism, Hinduism, Moslem are free to practice their religious symbols. All races, white, black, yellow have got space to express their cultural symbols. And all ethnic groups live side by side respectfully. As Albanese (1992: 12) declares in American Religions and Religion:

The manyness of religion means religion pluralism. It refers to the distinct religions of the many people who have come to call United States their homeland. Conversely, the oneness of religion means the religion unity among Americans. It refers to the dominant public cluster of organization, idea and moral values that have characterized this country.

Here Albanese strongly stresses on depicting pluralism aspect on religion life in American. America indeed appreciated and welcomed the immigrants who brought with them their religion from their mother land. Having had the freedom practicing their religions’ symbols they seems to be united in oneness, as they express in their slogan Unity in Diversity (Peacock in Imam Muhni, 2010) which symbolizes American pluralism. In that way America exists as a nation of multiculturalism.

However, the multicultural dimension in America can be divided into two large groups, Western and Eastern Culture. It has become universal convention that
the white, the European immigrants, are those who derived from Western Culture. And the Asia immigrants including the Middle East immigrants are those who inherited Eastern Culture.

Historical fact showed that Western Culture ruled all aspects of American life dominantly and hegemonously. They are superior over the other culture. Western culture was built based on Christian symbols which viewed nature as the main cause that separated human beings from God (Adam Fall). The Bible told that they were made in the image of God, not in the image of nature (Gen 1: 27). It told them that they should “have dominion over the fish and over fowl, and over the cattle, and over all the earth”, and subdue it (Gen 1: 28). This Biblical order according to Albanese (1992 :14) told Jews and Christian alike that their tasked were to dominate the earth, taming it to the human plan. As the result they grow to become liberalist, capitalist and admire science and technology (Albanese, 1992 and Weber, 1958).

In contrast with the westerners’ concept of creative symbols, in general the Easterners’ religious symbol is focusing on the natural world as spiritual cosmic. The Easterners according to Fernandez (1990 : 34) feels that they are one with the cosmic spirit. As part of the universe they participate intrinsically with nature and with the whole creature. Man is seen as microcosmos that participate in universe as macrocosmos. Both microcosmos and macrocosmos are one and there is a supernatural power in man.

Mahadevan (1956) explains that the Easterner sees nature as mythical totality. To the Indian nature gives birth to all of things, but then she taken them all back. As Easterner faith refer to the cosmic as the Lord , they believe that God is the cause of the universe.

Although they are very much contradiction in comprehending the concept of natural symbols, both Western and Eastern culture deeply influenced to the development of American Characters dealing with their effort to built national identity. As the spirit of Eastern symbolism works to the New England mind, they adopted it and transformed it to the transcendentalism spirit. Transcendentalism emerged as full fledged movement of New England thought between 1815 and 1836
(Spiller, 1974: 346). The movement was largely inspired by three sources: Neo-
Platonism, German idealist philosophy and certain Eastern mystical writings
(Horton, 1974:116).

From Neo-Platonism comes the belief in the importance of spirit over
matters, and an ascending hierarchy of spiritual values riling to absolute good, Truth,
and Beauty. This belief was inspired by Eastern symbolism which was introduced by
Plotinus (204-270 AD):

Like other Neoplatonists, Plotinus derives not only from Plato but also from
the Gnostic of Alexandria and the Eastern mystery....He gives the impression
of an improbable combination of Plato and Zen.....there is an Oriental flavor

From German idealist philosophy transmitted chiefly through Hegel (1770-
1831). He declares that he is a holistic thinker as he studies Oriental and India
symbolism. In this The Phenomenology he showed how the spiritual evolution had
worked itself out in different areas of human experience. In each area, Hegel
regarded the primitive Oriental mode an engaged with substance at the expense of
spirit, the intermediate classic mode as characterized by a harmony between body
and spirit, and the modern as the culminating triumph of spirit over substance.

It is obvious in the above description that the Westerner, the European had
long been interested in Eastern symbolism. Started first in Rome in the early century
(270 AD) and spread all over the European land and finally reached America in
nineteenth century in the name of transcendentalism. As Eastern symbolism
dominated over the transcendentalists—Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville in
many ways the spirit of transcendentalism colored their works.

Transcendentalists adoption of Eastern symbolism

Transcendentalism by nature drew its name from its emphasis on the realm of
thought which transcended or rose above the limits of reason (Tindal, 1989:30). Manifester Eastern symbolism transcendentalist believe human beings has the
ability to apprehend absolute Truth, absolute Justice, absolute Rectitude, the Truth,
the Beauty of eternal reality which man can discover in the world and which he can
incorporate into his life. And they were convinced of the unlimited perfectibility of man, to the enlightened soul. Taking this faith with them into the device wisdom and love, they found everywhere joy for mourning, and beauty for ashes. They discovered the faith in God beneath all errors, delusions, idolatries, and superstition (Werkmeister, 1994: 42-43).

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

The idea of Trancendentalism is presented in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature* (1836), in which he show how man can discover his spiritual nature and goes on to explore the realms of the universe to the ultimate reality of spirit. “Spirit” has become the seventh chapter in Nature. Emerson views of nature might be sacramental, a divine thing that in some way actually contained the divinity to which it pointed. And nature might there for have a quality of absoluteness about it.

Emerson’s description vividly underlines Eastern symbolism which views nature as a real and sacramental, then corresponding to it become very important. Harmony with nature becomes the broad high way to virtues living and, more, to union with divinity. In this way Eastern man should discover what is permanent by identifying the regular tides of nature’s flux. Doing so Eastern man could reveal that nature talk much to human being. Nature is able to speak to human mind, to find out the absolute reality which is manifested behind and beyond it (Kitagawa, 116).

In the first chapter of *Nature* (1836), Emerson shows the intimate relationship of man and nature, the states, “The Lover of Nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each earth, become part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man”. “Crossing a bare common”, Emerson confessed, could bring him “a perfect exhilaration”. In the wood he found “reason and faith”. The culmination was a mysticism of nature in a passage often cited: “standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanished. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the universal beings circulate through me. I am part or particle of God”.
Further, Emerson’s transforms Eastern symbolism in his succeeding chapter, as he develops a “higher instrumentalism, expounding the “uses” of nature under the four headings of commodity, beauty, and discipline. What is important about all of them here is that they were expressions of the law of correspondence, expressions in which nature, as mother and teacher, cultural humans and wrote the lessons they needed to intimate. With material benefits, nature assisted life lived through the senses and flowering in the practical arts (commodity). With an attractiveness at one physical, spiritual, nature manifested “a nobler want of man” (beauty), supplying an object for soul, will and intellect. Likewise, nature pointed to the “radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts”, suggesting the words that were ”signs of natural fact“ and exhibiting the ”particular natural facts” that were ”symbol of particular fact” (language. And finally, nature trained the understanding of conform to the shape of things and thought the will to comprehend the moral law (discipline). “Every natural process is but a version of a moral sentences”, Emerson declared (Albanese, 1990: 84).

Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is an outstanding American transcendentalist who adopted Eastern symbolism in most of his works. Sixty-one out of his one hundred and forty-seven works rich of Eastern symbolism. The manifestation of Eastern symbolism has attracted most international scholars. R. Hawari in “A Note On Edgar Allan Poe” (1976) asserted that Poe’s mind was “sometimes so deeply Oriental”. Poe Oriental reading is varied and extensive, from it he produced the Arabian piece of fiction. “The History of Simbad the Sailor” is an Arabian tales in which Poe create his Arabian character to show his refuses of science and technology. The ship, ever-present in every Sinbad tale, prove a natural springboard an ‘eight’ and ‘last’ voyage, this time not only to foreign countries but also to alien civilization: on board a ship of modern science and western culture. Thus Poe adopts the medieval, mythological tale as his best vehicle for a kind of science excursion concerned not so much with accurate scientific fact as with poetic reality.
Adnan M. Wazzan in "Islamic Element of Poe's Poems 'Al—Aaraaf' and 'Israfel’ proves Poe's admiration of Eastern Symbolism. Wazzan declares that Poe's intention in writing about East was to stimulate reader's mind to inquire into the facts of the wondrous elements of the East. With such view in Poe's mind, he asserts that 'Al—Aaraaf' was written in a symbolic manner. He explains that "Al—A’raf" is the title of the surah (chapter) seven in the Qur'an, verse forty-eight refers to Al—A’raf as the people of the limbo and it reads:

"Between them shall be a veil, and on the Heights (limbo) will be man who would know everyone by his marks.

They will call out to the companions of the garden (paradise) 'peace on you'. They will not have entered, but they will have an assurance (therof)

When their eyes shall be turn towards the companions of the fire (Hell) they will say 'Our Lord! Send us not to the company of the wrong doers'.

The man on the Heights (limbo) will call to certain men whom they will know from their marks, saying 'of what profit to you were your hoards and arrogant ways....""

Al—Araf, as referred to in books of exegeses and commentaries, is the limbo between the hell and heaven which accommodates, in the hereafter, a group of people of limbo whose benefactions (good deed) and sins (bad deeds) are equal. Thus neither benefactions led them to Paradise nor their sins took them to Hell. They await Allah's mercy and forgiveness, hoping to be in Paradise.

Having manifested Eastern symbolism in their works, in fact, the transcendentalists Emerson and Poe contribute to the transcendentalism assertion of natural constitution of mankind. They introduce an intellectual ferment of transcendentalism that it is not a strictly reasoned doctrine, it is a renaissance of conscious, living faith in the power of Reason, in the reality of spiritual in sight, in the privilege beauty, and glory of life.

This faith was becoming a movement. In 1836 there was a "Transcendental club" that attracted many New England radical thinker drawn by Emerson's faith in the self. They were William Ellery Channing, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Georg
Ripley, Oreston Brownson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody. As transcendentalists they applied the spirit of transcendentalists in many wags to change American life. The spirit reached into every aspect of American life: education (Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody), religion (Channing, Brownson, Theodore Parker), feminism (Fuller), political and social reform (Ripley, Alcott, Thoreau). (Roland & Bradbury, 1991: 121).

**Eastern Symbolism in Unitarian Christian**

Historically, New England Transcendentalism can be viewed as an instance of the widespread religions ferment which took place in American during the first half of the nineteenth century. With its doctrines of the natural rights of man made itself manifested not only in intellectual and political trade in America but also brought a corresponding effect on Orthodox Religion (Horton, 1974: 112).

When William Ellery Channing together with Emerson and other transcendentalists, introduced the new concept of Christianity, it gradually broke out the Puritan mind, as ganstad says, “Under rationalism banner, Unitarianism had broken Calvinist monopolistic hold upon the New England mind” (Goustad, 1973: 50). As a matter of fact transcendentalist concept of rational universe grew fruitfully in Unitarian Christianity.

Unitarians reject Calvinist view of human nature as deprived. They believe, there are no states of absolute or domination, but man is progressively a spiritual creature who may continue to develop. Human to them had a “moral nature” that was the foundation of virtue, and so there could be optimism and enthusiasm about what they might accomplish. Jesus for these Unitarians, showed the way to the perfection which was divine (Albanese, 1992: 128).

Calvinism teaches that, in consequence of Adam’s Sin in eating the forbidden fruit, God brings into life all his posterity with a nature wholly corrupt, so that they are utterly indisposed, and mode opposite to all that is spiritually good and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually. It teaches that all mankind, having fallen in Adam, are under God’s wrath and curse and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever. It teaches that from this ruined race
God, out of his mere good pleasure, has elected a certain number to be saved by Christ, not induce to this choice by any for sight of their faith or good works but wholly by his free grace and love; and that, having thus predestined them to eternal life. He reviews and sanctifies them by his almighty and special agency, and brings them into a state of grace from which they cannot fall and perish. It teaches that the rest of mankind he is pleased to pass over, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sins, to the honor of his justice and power (Bartlett, 1957: 44).

In opposition to Calvinist, Unitarians maintain that God’s attributes are intelligible, and justice as of these qualities in men. In fact, these qualities are essentially the same in God and man, though differing in degree, in purity, and in extent of operation. Human beings know not and they cannot conceive of any other justice or goodness than they learn from our own other; and if God have not these, he is altogether unknown to them as a moral being; he offers nothing for esteem and love to rest upon; than the worship is wasted: “we worship we know not what”. But God himself has given a moral faculty; and had employed us conscience; the sense of right, the power of perceiving moral distinctions, the power of discerning between justice and injustice, excellence and baseness, is the highest faculty given to us by God, the whole foundation of our responsibility, and our sole capacity for religion. Now, human beings are forbidden by this faculty to love a being who wants, or who fails to discover, moral excellence (Bartlett, 1957:50-52).

Realizing that God has given them a rational nature, missionaries called for preachers, to have a wilderness training and showed the American the way of the lord, rather then a thousand theological that only showed the opinion of the authorities. Many of the preachers left behind theology. Their admitted that they more of natural virtue from outdoor life than they could preach. Churchmen soon discovered they nature was a treacherous source for transcendental wisdom. They assured their congregations that natural objects must then be symbols of the highest Truth. And if the American would bring to nature, the same devout frame of mind they brought to church, God would surely revealed Himself. For the purpose of finding God in nature, Christian composers. created songs by combining thought on God and Nature. Sunday worship found themselves singing:
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Flowery meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in Thee

(Schmitt, 1969: 142)

Religions educators were most interested in helping other to find themselves. They led the young people to discover the fascination of outdoor life. The outdoor activities ought to be required in every church program. Amos Brooks an Instruction in Field Laboratory Science at Boston University’s School of Religions Education and Social Service suggested that the religions worker must be trained to make effective all the interesting experience of a like or a camping trip. Sunday school teachers tried as best they could, they began by gathering several hundred children and head up river for a day in the woods or sent the boys ashore and led them go in and have a glorious time. But some argued that it was not enough to take them out of doors. They should be taught to enjoy it. On February 8th, 1910, William D. Boyce Camp Fire Club and the young men’s Christian Association. A call be taught to enjoy it on February 8th, 1910, William D. Boyce established the Boy Scout organization in incorporation with the members of the Comp Fire Club and the young men’s Christian Association. A call for the Scout movement was very important became it was assumed that boy in modern life, especially in cities, do not have the chance, as did the boys of the past, they were strong, self reliant, resourceful and helpful, and to get acquainted with nature and outdoor life, without special guidance any training (Schmitt, 1969: 169).

**Transcendentalism in Social Life**

It has been explained earlier that the Puritans built its civilization cantering on the belief that nature was the object to conquer. It indicated that material success was their significant goal to achieve. To reach the goal they gave access to science and technology to enter into various aspects of American Social Life. The consequence was that with the aid of machine the natural resources were exploited rudely. Machine has changed the physical appearance of wilderness. The result was
that American experience a series of changes in the structure of their world, natural, social, personal and moral (Susmam, 1984: 106).

Appeared as a counter culture came the transcendentalists to penetrate the social and moral disorder of the establishing civilization. They started to reform the society. Emerson noticed that the Americans have became cowed, trustless, blinded by custom and habit. Thus he sounded this idea in his famous address The American Scholar (1837).

I believe men has been wrong; he has wronged himself. He has almost lost the light that can lead no account. Men in history, men in the world of today, are bugs, are spawn, and are called “the mass’ and “the herd” … men, such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money …. Wake them up and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true, … the main enterprice of the world for splendor, for extant, is the up building of men.

In the idea of culture, the transcendentalism offered important criticism of the on going society which pointed to the failure to uplift man. With their view that nature pointed the way to God, transcendentalists tried to create a perfect society by encouraging them to live in harmony with nature.

Brook farm was a cooperative community located in west Rexbury, Massachusetts. It was an association which attempts to apply the ideal of American transcendentalism to everyday life. George Ripley its founder, made an effort to the realization Emerson’s ideals of “Self-Reliance” and provide Christianity with new inspiration and new vision. His community’s goal was “to substitute brotherly corporation for selfish competition” (Martin, 1989: 322).

The Brook Farmers expressed their religion of nature, sometimes through solitary walks in the woods, and sometimes through the gathering of like spirit in communes. Appropriately, like many other communes in nineteenth-century America, they select natural setting, away from the distractions of city life. At Brook Farm, the members show their responsibility by performing simple life, hard work of running a farm and household. Said one of Brook Farmers: “We were happy,
contended, well-off and carefree; during a great work in the world, enthusiastic and faithful, we enjoy every moment of every day (Tindal, 1989: 329).

The expression of nature that was moral was expended in conversation movement. In 1972 preservation of the wilderness occurred legally when President Ulisses S. Grant (1822-1885) signed an act designating over two million acres of northwestern Wyoming as Yellowstone national Park. Thirteen years later the state of New York established a 715.000 – acre “forest preserve” in Adirondack with the stipulation that “Shall be kept forever a wild forest lands. With the milestone in the early history of American wilderness preservation, the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau bore fruit. Yet in neither case did the rational for action take account of the aesthetic, spiritual or cultural values of wilderness which had previously stimulated appreciation (Nash, 1967: 108).

Conclusion

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edgar Allan Poe are the most distinguishing transcendentalist American authors who undoubtedly introduced Eastern Symbolism to the American. When they applied the spirit of transcendentalism, it insisted in a complete break to the tradition and costume, encouraged individualism and rejected a too intellectual approach to life.

When the transcendentalist introduced Eastern symbolism, it gradually broke out the Puritan mind. As a matter of fact transcendentalist concept of rational universe grew fruitfully in Unitarian Christianity. Unitarian reject Calvinist view of human nature as deprived in consequence of Adam’s sin. However, Unitarians maintain that God Himself has given them a moral faculty; and had employed them conscience and moral excellence.

Adopted the virtues of Eastern symbolism, transcendentalists successfully created a perfect society by encouraging them to live in harmony with nature. The Brook Farmer expressed their appreciation of nature by walking solitary in the woods and through gathering of like a spirit in communes.

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