

A Literature Review of Recent Research on Transcendentalism in China and Abroad

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson set up a series of ideas which are called “Transcendentalism” by later generations. Transcendentalism is an important intellectual and cultural movement with a religious color in New England in the 1830s. Since the end of the nineteenth centuries, researches on transcendentalism both in America and in other countries have probed into different aspects of transcendentalism deeply. Based on the influence of transcendentalism, comments on transcendentalism, the reflection of transcendentalism in literary works and relationships between transcendentalism and other thoughts, this thesis reviews transcendentalism studies both in China and abroad.

Key words: Transcendentalism; Emerson; Influence of transcendentalism; Cultural exchange study; Literary analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a great thinker, essayist and poet in the American literary history. He was a

representative of the American Romanticism in the mid-19th century and an outstanding leader of the transcendental movement. Emerson’s thought is mainly embodied in his major works: *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *The Divinity School Address*, *Self-Reliance* and *The Over-Soul*. Emerson was great to confluence ideas of classics works and formed his own philosophy. The kernel of transcendentalism is that human beings can connect straightly with god without any religion. This ideology confirmed individual value, at the same time approved individual complacency and autonomy and affected positively man’s soul and spirit, the amplification of personality.

Emerson’s ideas and the transcendental movement exerted a great influence on the American intellectual world of his time and brought and unprecedented prosperity to it. Emerson’s influence on American literature led American Romanticism to a new phase, the phase of New England transcendentalism, the summit of American Romanticism. In terms of American literature, Emerson’s transcendentalism not only enriched the content and theme in American writing but also made a breakthrough in writing technique. Emerson’s thought and style of writing inspired a whole generation of authors of his time such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson and Howells as well as writers of the following generation such as Pound, Frost and Hemingway. All of these have formed an impetus to the development of American literature.

Many studies have been done on transcendentalism from different perspectives. There are the influence of transcendentalism, comments on transcendentalism, the reflection of transcendentalism in literary works and relationships between transcendentalism and other thoughts. This thesis tries to review transcendentalism studies in China and abroad, to show the achievements and to find the potential research fields.

1. STUDIES IN CHINA

In China, the studies on transcendentalism began in the mid 19th century. Xu Chi translated *Walden*, but until 1980s transcendentalism came into researchers eyes. In 1990s, transcendentalism study got great achievements. From 1994 to 2010, the researches about transcendentalism can be classified into three groups in China: Literary analysis from the perspective of transcendentalism, comments on transcendentalism and the cultural exchange study of transcendentalism.

1.1 Literary Analysis From the Perspective of Transcendentalism

Emerson's thought and style of writing inspired a whole generation of authors of his time such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson and Howells as well as writers of the following generation such as Pound, Frost and Hemingway. So transcendentalism could be seen in many literature works. The representative works are: *The Transcendental Ideas Expressed in Walt Whitman's On Myself* which written by Wang Gui-ming and Liu Wen-jie; *The Transcendental Thought in Scarlet Letter* which written by Sun Ya; *Understanding Kate Chopin's The Awakening from the perspective of transcendentalism and Transcendentalism in Nature* which written by Sun Quan-jun.

In Wang Gui-ming and Liu Wen-Jie's thesis they discussed transcendentalism expressed in *On Myself* and discussed the relations of Whitman's philosophy and that of the 19th century major philosophers such as Kant, Hegel and Emerson from the perspectives of philosophical poetics, and meanwhile demonstrates the poet's profound transcendental concept of pantheism through discussing the nature of self and God, and the combination of body and soul. And also Sun Ya's thesis discussed transcendentalism in *Scarlet Letter* on three aspects—the over-soul, the view of nature and self-reliance by analyzing Hester Prynne and Pearl. Sun Quan-jun's paper showed the great influence of Emerson on *The Awakening*, and made a conclusion for the tragic ending that: "Intuition and individualism will disappear in reality", sometimes people should give up their individual needs to keep balance in society.

1.2 Comments on Transcendentalism

After being criticized and discarded for more than half a century, Ralph Waldo Emerson becomes, once again, the focus of academic attention, with scholars and critics rereading his ideas and reevaluation his practical and potential influence. And scholars in China have got many achievements in this aspect, such as Zhang Su-yan's *On the Influence of Emerson's Transcendentalism Upon American Culture*; Li Zheng-rong's *Emerson's Artistic Viewpoints of Transcendentalism*; Liu Xiao-hui's *On Practical Significance of Emerson in the Post-modern Context: with an Review of Emerson by Lawrence*

Bull and Others; Yang Xiao-feng's *On the Structure of Transcendental Individualism*; Zhong Da-feng's *Transcendentalism and American National Character* and so on.

Transcendentalism as a form of idealism, or philosophical Romanticism took on special significance in the United States during the middle third of the nineteenth century. In Zhang Su-yan's work, by analyzing the influence on American spirit and literature, his work showed that Emerson developed transcendentalism into a free, democratic and independent national culture and exerted great influence upon the Americans from generation to generation. And Zhong Da-feng's work also reflected transcendentalism's influence in America. In his paper, the role of transcendentalism in the transformation is explored in terms of individualism, American values, tolerance, and innovation. There are some essays explored viewpoints included in transcendentalism. Li Zheng-rong's essay focused on the artistic viewpoint of transcendentalism adopted by Emerson, whose unconfined trait is based on "being impossible to know". He advocates universal spirit, the doctrine of art coming first and an artistic outlook centering on letters. In Liu Xiao-hui's work, she based on a review of *Emerson* by Lawrence Buell tried to analyze the significance of Emerson's cosmopolitan sense, his anxiety of modernity and his philosophical speculation in the postmodern context.

1.3 The Cultural Exchange Study of Transcendentalism

In the procedure of culture development, it is a common phenomenon that one country often absorbed ideas and conception from the alien culture systems. In the development of transcendentalism, Emerson not only grasped the essences of Eastern literature, but had the highly ideological. Among the ambiguous frame of eastern thoughts, it was the natural tendency of spirits and transcendence which include the unity of world, the concord of nature and people, the entirety of men, the demeanor of meditation. Therefore, there are many works about the cultural exchange study of transcendentalism in China. Such as Zhao Min's *Emerson's Transcendentalism and Confucianism*; Yao Li-mei's *American Transcendentalism and Chinese Classical Philosophical Thoughts*; Xi Chuan-jin's *Laozi's "Dao" and Emerson's "Oversoul"* and XieZhi-chao's *Emerson and Thoreau's Reception of the Four Books—A Study of Transcendentalism in the Vision of Comparative Literature*.

In Zhao Min's work, she discussed the relationships between transcendentalism and Confucianism and the reason why Emerson chose Confucianism. Similarly, Yao Li-mei presented the relationship between American transcendentalism and Chinese classical philosophical thoughts from three aspects, the world's integration, the nature, the material life and mental pursuit, their

common grounds and differences. And it told the effects of Chinese Classical Philosophical thoughts on American Transcendentalism, especially on Emerson's thoughts, and the sublation of the two cultures. Besides, in Xi Chuan-jin's paper, it made an analysis and comparison of the cosmogony, the theory of heaven and man, intuition consciousness in Laozi's "Dao" and Emerson's "over soul". It pointed out the similarities and differences between them. In Xie Zhi-chao's thesis, under the theoretic direction of new criticism, structuralism, and reception criticism and in light of influence study, parallel study, interdisciplinary study, this thesis attempted to sum up the academic achievements in the researches on the reception of the Four Books by Emerson and Thoreau, analyze and comment on their reception.

2. STUDIES ABROAD

As an important ideological movement in America, transcendentalism has been influencing the American society very profoundly since its beginning and its development. For more than one hundred years, the study of transcendentalism has been continually going on; it has never ceased. Transcendentalism studies as well as transcendentalism movement; it has got a lot of achievements in America. Studies in America also can be divided into three groups: biographical study, comments on transcendentalism and the cultural exchange study of transcendentalism.

2.1 Biographical Study

Researchers focused on the representatives of transcendentalism—Emerson and Thoreau in this study field. About Emerson, Robert D. Richardson wrote down *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*; Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson wrote *Emerson in His Own Time* together, this is a biographical chronicle of his life which drawn from recollections, interviews and memoirs by family, friends and associates. Wesley T. Mott and Robert E. Burkholder compiled *Emersonian Circles: Essays in Honor of Joel Myerson*; Walter Kenneth Cameron's work *Emerson the Essayist* is an outline of his philosophical development through 1836, with special emphasis on the sources and interpretation of nature, also bibliographical appendices of general and special interest to students of American literature, emphasizing Thoreau, Emerson, the Boston library society and selected documents of New England Transcendentalism. Besides, Henry David Gray wrote *Emerson: A Statement of New England Transcendentalism as Expressed in the Philosophy of Its Chief Exponent*. These theses that have been mentioned above were based on the development of Emerson's thought and discussed Emerson's viewpoints about religion, philosophic, literature from different aspects and praised his contribution to the development of transcendentalism and American literature.

In recent years, a specialist on Emerson---David Robinson gave up the traditional method of biography and explored every aspect of Emerson's thought. He published *The Political Emerson* which is essential writings on politics and social reform; *The Spiritual Emerson* which is essential writings; *Apostle of culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* and *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* which is the pragmatism and ethical purpose in his later works.

2.2 Comments on Transcendentalism

Emerson and Thoreau are the representatives of transcendentalism, but they cannot represent the whole transcendental movement. In the past century, for the transcendentalism studies, many researchers tended to make a macro grasp to transcendentalism. Therefore, a lot of works came into stage: Robert D. Habich wrote *Transcendentalism and the Western Messenger: a History of the Magazine and Its Contributor*; Joel Myerson published *American Transcendentalists and The Transcendentalist: a Review of Research and Criticism*; Kenneth Walter Cameron compiled *Transcendental Epilogue* which is the primary materials for research in Emerson, Thoreau, literary New England, the influence of German theology and Higher biblical criticism. These works collected and coordinated the earliest materials and pictures about the transcendental movement and reviewed the history and representatives of transcendentalism.

With the development of cultural studies, Donald N. Koster wrote *Transcendentalism in America*; Octavius Brooks Frothingham wrote *Transcendentalism in New England*. They discussed the appearance and development of transcendentalism in the huge cultural background. At the same time, dictionaries of transcendentalism published. Wesley T. Mott's *Biographical Dictionary of Transcendentalism* and *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism* are the typical works in this field.

2.3 Cultural Exchange Study of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism concluded thoughts about religion, philosophy, literature, art, politics and economics. And these thoughts have made useful study models for cultural exchange study of transcendentalism. Exploring viewpoints to nature, politics and economics in transcendentalism and understanding the meaning of transcendental literature and culture both are topics in the transcendentalism studies. In this field, scholars from different points of view discussed the features that influenced transcendentalism, such as: Charles Horton Cooley's *On Self and Social Organization*; Anne C. Rose's *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement* and Charles Reid Metzger's *The Transcendental Esthetics in America: Essays on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman*. Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism*, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn's *Sixty Years of Concord, 1855-1915* and *Transcendental and Literary New England* explored

the influence of transcendentalism to American literature. Besides, J. P. Rao Rayapati's *Early American Interest in Vedanta mentioned the reception of Vedantic philosophy in American literature*. And Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* talked about how the orient culture influenced American spirit, and this work became the milestone in the study of transcendentalism and orient thoughts. Arthur James Versluis' *American Transcendentalism and the Orient* showed the relationship between transcendentalism and orient philosophy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above study, it's easy to see that transcendentalism study not only a kind of literature study, but also a kind of philosophic study. Economy and political globalization gave transcendentalism a lot of real meanings. The communication between eastern and western culture gives a new and big scope to transcendentalism.

As a great thinker and prose writer and poet, Emerson played an important role in the development of American literary history. He proclaimed his thought to the thirst for freedom and independence in American thought, culture, and literature in the early period of America and advanced a complete set of transcendental ideas that were far-reaching and impressive in American culture. Today, Emerson's thought and influence are also of great significance to China and the Chinese and there are much people can learn from his thought. In this sense, Emerson's thought is not only beneficial to America and American, but also to China and the Chinese, even the whole world.

Transcendentalism—as the bridge between eastern and western culture, it had played an important role in cultural communication. In transcendentalism, there are still a lot to be further explored in a deep sense and wide perspective.

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