

Picturing Her Landscape: *An Interpretation of Amy Lowell's Poems From Emerson's Transcendentalism*

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Abstract

Amy Lowell is a female poet in the American Imagist movement in the twentieth century. The former studies have mainly focused on the images in her poems from the perspective of aesthetics. Few studies have pointed out the philosophical implications of her poetry. This paper tries to approach Lowell's poems from the perspective of Emerson's transcendental philosophy. Although the two great figures lived in different times, a direct link between them can hardly be built, they share some similarities, and their poems are colored by transcendental thoughts: Both of them admit the "oversoul"; mankind can be in parallel with nature; both of them oppose the dehumanization of industrialization process; both of them advocate for individuals' seeking for spiritual freedom. From this spectrum, Lowell's poems can be considered carrying the spiritual creed of Transcendentalism.

Key words: Amy Lowell; Emerson; Transcendental philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

Amy Lawrence Lowell (1874-1925), is a time-honored American poet, one of the leading figures of the Imagist School from Brookline, Massachusetts, and she

posthumously won Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1926. From 1913 until 1925, Lowell was deeply involved in Imagism. After the break from Ezra Pound, she redirected the Imagist Movement, and then literary people called the American Imagist Movement "Aymgist" Movement, which indicated Amy was really a woman of importance in this undertaking. The current studies on Imagism have showed that people have placed much importance on Pound, but so rare efforts have been directed to Lowell. Few of her poems have been thoroughly understood, and much more still waits probing. Considering this problem, the paper will shed some new light on Lowell studies. A new spectrum for viewing her poems is from Emerson's transcendental philosophy.

It is hard to find a direct link between imagism and transcendentalism, for they are the voices of different times in American history. However, one thing the imagists and transcendentalists share with each other is that they both put emphasis on symbols, and they use symbols to relate their intuitive feelings with the objects. Lowell expresses her thoughts in symbols, as symbolism is a universal thing for Imagists. Emerson values symbols, as he can use words for their pictorial and imaginative meaning.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 An Overview of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism is a philosophical and literary movement, which centered in Concord and Boston and was prominent in the intellectual and cultural life of New England from 1836 until just before the Civil War. It was inaugurated in 1836 by a Unitarian discussion group that came to be called the Transcendental Club (Abrams, 2004, p.326). The central exponents of the club are Emerson and Thoreau. The central idea of transcendentalism is that man can have an intuitive cognizance of moral and other truths

that transcend the limits of ordinary rationality operating on the materials of human sense-experience. In this way, transcendentalism can perhaps be best understood as a somewhat late and localized manifestation of the European Romantic movement (Horton, 1974, p.116).

Under the influence of Neo-Platonism, German idealist philosophy and certain Eastern mystical writings introduced into the Boston area in the early nineteenth century, the transcendentalists insisted on a complete break with tradition and custom by encouraging individualism and self-reliance.

The major features of transcendentalism can be summarized as follows: First, its emphasis on spirit over matter, or oversoul, as the most important thing in the universe. Oversoul is a pervading power for goodness, from which all things come and to which all are a part; second, it focuses on individuals. Individuals are the most important elements of society. People should depend on themselves for spiritual fulfillment. Individual soul communes with oversoul, therefore divine; Third, a new perception of nature as symbolic of the spirit or God. Nature is the garment of oversoul. It is alive, filled with God's overwhelming presence. Nature could have a healthy influence on the human mind.

New England transcendentalism was important to American literature. It inspired a whole new generation of famous authors such as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and Dickinson. Without its impetus, America might have been deprived of one of its most prolific literary periods in its history (Chang, 2003, p.59).

1.2 Emerson's Transcendentalist Philosophy

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, in Boston, Massachusetts. In 1821, he took over as director of his brother's school for girls. In 1823, he wrote the poem *Good-Bye*. In 1832, he became a transcendentalist, leading to the later essays *Self-Reliance* and *The American Scholar*. Emerson continued to write and lecture into the late 1870s. He died on April 27, 1882, in Concord, Massachusetts.

Emerson's early preaching had often touched on the personal nature of spirituality. Now he found kindred spirits in a circle of writers and thinkers who lived in Concord, including Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau and Amos Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May Alcott). In the 1830s Emerson gave lectures that he afterward published in essay form. These essays, particularly *Nature* (1836), embodied his newly developed philosophy. *The American Scholar*, based on a lecture that he gave in 1837, encouraged American authors to find their own style instead of imitating their foreign predecessors. Emerson became known as the central figure of his literary and philosophical group, now known as the American Transcendentalists. These writers shared a key belief that each individual could transcend, or move beyond, the physical world of the senses into deeper

spiritual experience through free will and intuition. In this school of thought, God was not remote and unknowable; believers understood God and themselves by looking into their own souls and by feeling their own connection to nature. The 1840s were productive years for Emerson. He founded and co-edited the literary magazine *The Dial*, and he published two volumes of essays in 1841 and 1844. Some of the essays, including *Self-Reliance*, *Friendship* and *Experience*, number among his best-known works. His four children, two sons and two daughters, were born in the 1840s.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is a leading New England transcendentalist. The central element of his philosophy is his firm belief in the transcendence of the "oversoul". His emphasis on the spirit runs through virtually all his writings. He states in his *Nature* that: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul" (Baym & Franklin, 1995, p.440). Nature, in his eyes, is the purest and the most restorative moral influence on man. An intuitive cognition of a spiritual God can be achieved through nature. Therefore, he advocates man's conversion with Nature. By conversion, man can feel completely merged with the outside world, and man becomes part of nature, and man's soul can go beyond the physical limits of the body into the omniscience of the oversoul. Spirit is all-pervading, not only in the soul of man, but behind the nature, throughout nature. Against Christianity's view on man's original sins, Emerson favors man's divinity for that man is made in the image of God and is just a little less than him (Chang, 2003, p.61). Because man is divine, man can be important, and responsible for himself. If man depends on himself, cultivates himself, and brings out the divinity in himself, he can become better and even perfect. Therefore Emerson encourages individualism, self-reliance and self-culture, as Henry Nash Smith ventures to suggest: "Emerson's message was eventually (to use a telegraphic abbreviation) self-reliance" (Milton, 1962, p.60). Emerson is optimistic about human perfectibility. The regeneration of individuals leads to the regeneration of society.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 Emerson's Disapproval of Rationalism of Unitarianism and Lowell's Poems *New York at Night*, *The Way*

"What is popularly called transcendentalism among us," Emerson declares, "is idealism; idealism as appeared in 1842." What happened at this time was that some New Englanders, who were not happy about the materialistic-oriented life of their time, formed their own transcendentalist club. Emerson was one of the leading figures. Emerson's view on idealism is actually expression of the transcendentalists' radical rebellion against the faith of Boston businessmen and the cold, rigid

rationalism of Unitarianism. Emerson, together with other transcendentalists, advocate for the spiritual fulfillment in American industrialization, because Unitarianism is the driving force in industrialization which is so disastrous for people's self-seeking and self-actualization.

Though living in the beginning of the twentieth century, Amy Lowell, the pioneer imagist, also continues to express her view against one of the hideous effects of modernity, that is, the industrialization process, which was first sharply criticized by American transcendentalists. Amy's poem *New York at Night* and *The Way* oppose strongly the encroachment of industrialization upon people's spiritual world.

In her poem *New York at Night*, she describes the New York city as "monotonous, joyless emblem of the greed of millions, robber of the best which earth can give". New York is jammed with people and groans under high pressure. The peaceful nature cannot reconcile with the chaotic urban activities. The writer finds herself desperate in this industrialized city, so she sends out a quest:

Where art thou hiding, where thy peace? This is the hour, but thou art not. Will waking tumult never cease? Nature forsakes this man-begot and festering wilderness, and now the long still hours are here, not jot of dear communing do I know; instead the glaring, man-filled city groans below.

The answer to the question is explicit, that is, it is hard to resort peace to nature, because man's greed has damaged the tranquility of nature. Lowell has her faith in nature, but she can only extend her sympathy towards the devastating environment. Lowell expresses her pity on nature through her other poems. In her poem *The Way*, she describes a once crystal-clear river is contaminated by chemical wastes from factories during the process of industrialization and urbanization. The lines read like this:

And now he is come to a river, a line of gray, sullen water, not blue and splashing, but dark, rolling somberly on to the ocean. But on the far side of a city whose window flame gold in the sunset. It lies fair and shining before him, a gem set betwixt sky and water, and spanning the river a bridge, fail promise to longing desire.

2.2 Emerson's View About Oversoul and Lowell's Poems *A Winter Ride*, *At Night*, *Generations*, *Behind a Wall*

Emerson emphasizes the all-pervading oversoul. Individual soul is part of the oversoul. Therefore man's soul can go beyond the physical limits of the body into the omniscience of the oversoul through the vehicle of nature. This idea finds expression in Amy Lowell's poems. In her *A Winter Ride*, she exclaims that "Everything mortal has moments immortal, swift and God-gifted, immeasurably bright." Lowell is almost as ecstasy to discover the natural beauty during her ride on a white road, and she even utters that: "Joy! With the vigorous earth I am one." It is within the embrace of nature that she finds herself vitalized and she wishes to become part of the whole nature.

To become part of the whole nature, the writer wants to be enlightened by the nature, and this opinion is expressed in her poem *At Night*. A few sentences read like this: "O Star! Is filled with your white light, from far, so suffer me this one night to enjoy the freedom of the onward sweeping wind." The writer feels that her inner world is enlightened by the star from afar, and the light gives her solace in a hot summer night.

Similarly, in the poem "Generations", Lowell expresses her view of man's integration into nature:

You are like the stem of a young beech-tree, straight and swaying...your voice is like leaves, softly struck upon by a south wind. Your shadow is no shadow, but a scattered sunshine... But I am like a great oak under a cloudy sky, watching a stripling beech grow up at my feet.

The idea of being part of nature is also reflected in her poem *Behind a Wall*. She compares her inner world to a garden warmed with drowsy sunshine, rimmed with flowers, and cut through by dreaming paths, and there she can find her inner solace.

2.3 Emerson's "Worship of Nature as Spiritual Welfare" and Lowell's Poems *Listening*, *Loon Point*, *Summer*, *Song*

As Emerson says in his *Nature* that:

Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood. (Baym & Franklin, 1995, p.441)

In transcendentalists' eyes, go back to nature, sink yourself back into its influence, and you will become spiritually whole again. This view finds its expression in Lowell's poems. In her poem *Listening*, she highly praises the nature by saying that

The song of earth has many different chords; Ocean has many moods and many tones, yet always ocean. In the damp spring woods, the painted trillium smiles, while crisp pine cones autumn alone can ripen. So is this one music with a thousand cadences.

In her eyes, she finds the nature so beautiful, full of different colors, like a man, who has different moods.

People are likely to find inspiration in nature as she expresses her viewpoint in her poem *Summer*.

Some men there are who find in nature all their inspiration, hers the sympathy which spurs them on to any great endeavor. To them the fields and woods are closest friends, and they hold dear communion with its fall, and the great winds bring healing in their sound. To them a city is a prison house where pent up human forces labor and strive, where beauty dwells not, driven forth by man; by where in winter they must live until summer gives back the spaces of the hills. To me it is not so. I love the earth.

For life alone is creator of life, and closest contact with the human world is like a lantern shining in night. To light me to knowledge of myself, I love the vivid life of winter months

in constant intercourse with human minds, where every new experience is gain and on all sides we feel the great world's heart; the pulse and throb of life which makes us men!

Nature for her is the source of enlightenment and inspiration for her to find knowledge of herself.

The worship of nature as spiritual welfare can be best seen in Lowell's poem *Loon Point*. There are a few sentences read like this:

All round us the secret of Nature is telling itself to our sight, we may guess at her meaning but never can know the full mystery of night. But her power of enchantment is on us, we bow to the spell which she weaves, made up of the murmur of waves and the manifold whisper of leaves.

In this poem, Lowell sings a high praise of nature's mysteries, and her mysteries are embodied in the living things. Leaves can be messengers of the nature. Nature is seemed as spiritual welfare for the reason that nature lasts forever. This idea is reflected in her poem *Song*. The writer paints so many natural images: A flower, a butterfly, a cloud, a wave, and she wants to be like them, to enjoy the wildness and freedom of nature. But the most favorable image is "wave", because she explains in the final stanza that: "Soon they die, the flowers; insects live a day; clouds dissolve in showers; only waves at play last forever. Shall endeavor make a sea of purpose mightier than we dream today?" Only "waves" can last forever, because the sea will not dry up. Sea symbolizes the prevailing power of nature, and that is what the writer most worships.

CONCLUSION

Amy Lowell's poems have been mainly studied from the perspective of aesthetics, but this paper has investigated

her poems from a new angle, that is, from Emerson's transcendentalist philosophy. Through the investigation, we have found Lowell provides us with a lot of poems which can make us better understand Emerson's philosophy. Lowell's poems are the embodiments of Emerson's philosophy mainly composed of following ideas: The oversoul is all-pervading, thus individual soul can communicate with the oversoul through the media of nature, and individuals should worship nature as a spiritual welfare. Transcendentalists' opposition against the rationalism of Unitarianism also finds expression in Lowell's poems.

Though an explicit link cannot be built between Amy Lowell's Imagism and Ralph Emerson's transcendentalism, studies have showed that they might share some similarities, that is, the emphasis on individuals' spiritual freedom and fulfillment, rebellion against tradition and custom, opposition to the dehumanization in the process of industrialization and urbanization.

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