

# Two Forms of Solitude: Tao Qian's Reclusive Ideal and Emerson's Transcendentalist Vision

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**Abstract:** *This essay compares the reclusive ideal extolled by Chinese poet Tao Qian and the solitude that Ralph Waldo Emerson regards as a prerequisite to self-trust. The works of both Tao Qian and Emerson—forerunners of Chinese and American pastorals, respectively—seem to bear the imprint of Lao Zi's Daodejing. Both express distaste for material aggrandizement and social conformity, for the social, economical, and political pressures that curtail individual spirit. Both worship a universal spirit, exalt intuition over didacticism, deem nature to be salubrious and edifying, and discern correspondences between ecological and moral well-being. Their differences are equally pronounced. The Chinese poet maintains he can only be true to his high-minded nature by removing himself to the countryside, secluded from world's affairs; though mindful of familial duties, he is content to lead a quiet pastoral existence. The New England sage, who sees nature as ancillary to the divine spark within each mortal, asserts that an independent self that harkens to its promptings can find nature and solitude anywhere. Notwithstanding his aversion to societal demands, he shoulders responsibility as a public intellectual who weighs in with a piece of his mind concerning pressing political issues.*

**Keywords:** *Tao Qian/Tao Yuanming; Ralph Waldo Emerson; pastoral, nature; solitude*

Although Tao Qian 陶潜 (also known as Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 and Sire of the Five Willows 五柳先生, 365-427 CE) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) hail from different epochs and continents, the two arguably have inaugurated Chinese and American pastorals, respectively. Tao Qian, the preeminent “recluse” poet of the Six Dynasties period, spearheaded the “Return Home to the Farm” tradition, while Emerson (along with his disciple Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman) ushered in American Transcendentalism. Their considerable impact goes beyond national borders into each other's country. Tao Qian has inspired not only Tang and Song poets such as Li Po 李白, Tu Fu 杜甫, and Su Shi 苏轼, but also American Beat writers of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Emerson is venerated not only by American and European luminaries such as Thoreau, Whitman, Thomas Carlyle, and Friedrich Nietzsche, but also by diasporic Chinese writers such as Gao Xingjian and Ha Jin. The reclusive ideal of Tao Qian and the transcendentalist worldview of Emerson converge in many ways: both writers take for granted the equivalence of ecological and moral landscape, of nature and existential solitude; both prefer independent living to social conformity, wealth, or fame. But they differ markedly in their conceptions of “self” and “nature” and in their individual visions of the relationship between self, nature, and society. For Tao Qian, the self exists in harmony with nature, which can be found only in the countryside; for Emerson both humanity and nature partake of a divine intelligence, but only an open mind not clouded by

received knowledge can decode a universe replete with meaning. Although both of them are averse to public service and governmental interference, they respond in disparate fashions. Tao Qian resigns from official posts and “returns” to the countryside, which he relishes as his “natural” abode; Emerson, in contrast, never ceases to be a public intellectual who speaks out vehemently against unjust policies.

Through an analysis of selected works by Tao Qian and Emerson, I demonstrate their common spiritual instincts and aesthetic predilections, their revelry in nature and solitude, their divergent construal of selfhood, and their contrasting response to civil society. The first section of this essay shows the Daoist inflection in Tao Qian's reclusiveness and Emersonian Transcendentalism, on their affinity with nature and antipathy to social and political demands. The second examines the confluence of ecological and ontological climate in their works. The third contrasts their views concerning the relationship between self and nature. The fourth juxtaposes Tao Qian's quiescence with Emerson's activism. The last section illustrates the spiritual and stylistic resemblances in the two literati.

## Daoist Impact on the Reclusive and Transcendentalist Appreciation of Nature

Both Tao Qian and Emerson believe human beings should be nature-centered rather than society-centered. Their joint conviction in the human spirit's intimate re-

relationship with nature seems rooted in Daoism. Tao Qian lived during a period marked by warfare and instability in the years between the collapse of the Han dynasty (220 CE) and the reunification of northern and southern dynasties by the Sui Dynasty (589 CE). He espouses a simple life close to nature and decries the pernicious effects of politics and commerce. Quitting official life to farm in the countryside, he exemplifies the Daoist virtues of humility, gentleness, resignation, quiescence, and contentment. He says of himself in “The Life of the Sire of Five Willows” <五柳先生传>, his self-portrait: “Living quietly in solitude and spare of speech, he covets not rank nor wealth.”<sup>2</sup> His Daoist bent is further evident in lines such as “The Dao has been lost...And people everywhere are misers of their feelings” and “The life of man is like a shadow-play / Which must in the end return to nothingness,” and in his persistent association of nature with individualist freedom (as opposed to Confucian emphasis on duty and hierarchy).<sup>3</sup> As recorded in autobiographical “Five Poems on Returning to Dwell in the Country” <归园田居> Tao Qian considers the life of affairs in the city to be a “net” or a “cage,” and the countryside to be his natural habitat: “Inadvertently I fell into the Dusty Net...Too long I was held within the barred cage. / Now I am able to return again to Nature.”<sup>4</sup>

Daoist philosophy seems to resonate with Emerson as well, but whether he has actually read *The Book of Dao* is open to speculation. His familiarity with Hindu and Confucian classics, however, has been documented by Frederic Ives Carpenter and Arthur Christy.<sup>5</sup> Lyman V. Cady further informs us that “Thoreau’s acquaintance with Oriental texts began with his residence in Emerson’s home in 1841” and among the Oriental books in Emerson’s private collection were Joshua Marshman’s *The Works of Confucius* (1809) and David Collie’s *The Chinese Classical Work, commonly called the Four Books* (1828), the latter being also Confucian classics.<sup>6</sup> Emerson has obviously read French translations of Chinese texts as well. Christy indicates that the name of the French Sinologist Jean Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788-1832) “was often on the tongues of the Concordians”; Emerson even notes in his journal that Rémusat’s *L’Invariable Milieu* (1817) begins with “promising definitions” of nature.<sup>7</sup> Although *L’Invariable Milieu* is also a translation of *The Four Books*, Rémusat’s “Extrait d’un memoire sur Lao Tseu,” which “dealt with parallels of Daoism, Plato, and Pythagoras,” appeared in the *Journal Asiatique of 1823*.<sup>8</sup> Emerson, given his extensive reading and his familiarity with Rémusat’s other works, might have come across this article, *pace* Carpenter’s assertion to the contrary: “Lao-tse [Emerson] had never read.”<sup>9</sup> David T.Y. Chen, in “Thoreau and Daoism,” suggests that another French translation of Daoist texts, G. Pauthier’s *Memoire sur l’Origin et la Propagation de la Doctrien du Tao*, published in 1831 by Librairie Orientale, was also available to the Concordians and that Chen strongly suspects Thoreau to have read this book.<sup>10</sup>

If so, Thoreau’s mentor is unlikely to have been unaware of its content.

Not being a Sinologist myself, I refrain from claiming any definitive imprint of Laozi on Emerson. Yet one of the most elusive concepts in Transcendentalism, about an all-encompassing spirit that is the source of all wisdom and intuition, is highly reminiscent of *The Book of Dao*: “Tao is invisibly empty, / But its use is extremely plentiful. It is profound like the originator of all things...I do not know where it comes from / It seems to have appeared before the existence of God.”<sup>11</sup> Compare this with Emerson’s reflection on the primal Intuition:

*Who is the Trustee [of self-trust]? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition.... In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin.... We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity....If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault.*<sup>12</sup>

Emerson’s premise about a pervasive spirit that has no beginning and no end and that is at one with all things is almost identical with Laozi’s evocation of Dao. Gu Zhengkun, as English translator of *The Book of Tao and Teh*, observes: “Daoism is systematically constructed with four integral parts: 1) Tao as the ontological being; 2) Tao as the dialectic law; 3) Tao as the epistemological tool; 4) Tao as a practical guide to worldly affairs.”<sup>13</sup> Emerson’s Intuition similarly has an ontological, dialectic, epistemological, and practical dimensions.

In particular, Laozi’s notions about the law of nature and about the paradox of “less is more” inform both Tao Qian’s and Emerson’s writing. Both the Chinese poet and the American doyen prefer a simple life of wandering in the woods, removed from the din of the city and unencumbered by wealth, power, or official duty. In “Peach Blossom Spring,” Tao Qian’s well-known fable, a fisherman who follows the course of a brook finds a grove aflame with blossoming peach trees that ends in a natural spring.<sup>14</sup> By leaving his boat and walking through a small pass, he comes upon a village founded dynasties ago by refugees from wars, draft, taxation, economic rivalry, and political persecution. There are no potentates controlling the populace in this egalitarian community, where villagers make their living by farming and raising cattle. After the fisherman returns to his prefecture he informs the prefect of the unique village against the wishes of its inhabitants, but when the prefect dispatches

officers to go back with the fisherman, he is unable to locate the village again. Peach Blossom Spring, Tao Qian implies, exists only in the imagination. In the fable, the ruling class is responsible for most of the ills of society; magistrates often reek of toadyism, rapaciousness, and oppression. Both officialdom and wealth (which tend to go in tandem) are deemed corrupting, unworthy of a poet's pursuit and detrimental to artistic integrity. Tao Qian himself resigned from the Jin court to become a farmer and lived in the countryside for twenty-two years before he died at sixty-three; he is known for his ascerbic refusal to "grovel to petty provincial functionaries for his livelihood 我岂能为五斗米，折腰乡里小儿" [literally, how can I bend my waist for five bushels of rice].<sup>15</sup>

Although Emerson never worked as a civil servant, he gave up his secure post as Unitarian minister in 1832 when he was scarcely thirty, "without any assurance that he [would] ever be employed again."<sup>16</sup> After touring Europe, he retired to a farm in the neighborhood of Concord. Like Tao Qian, he associates public life with spineless conformity and advocates firsthand communion with nature. He looks askance at social conventions, religious creeds, and national laws: "the wise know that foolish legislation is a rope of sand, which perishes in the twisting; that the State must follow, and not lead the character and progress of the citizen."<sup>17</sup> In other words, individuals must exercise innate virtues even if these run afoul of official edicts.

Emerson's ruminations about solitude and nature, like Tao Qian's reclusive ponderings, are grounded in "the presumed opposition between the realm of the collective, the organized, and the worldly on the one hand, and the personal, the spontaneous, and the inward on the other."<sup>18</sup> Like Tao Qian, who discerns a certain kinship between self and nature, Emerson finds "something more dear and connate [in the wilderness] than in streets and villages."<sup>19</sup> He sees exposure to nature as conducive to solitude and selfhood:

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate him and what he touches. ... The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible.<sup>20</sup>

The passage suggests that solitude is a sublime experience accessible to the human faculty in nature's presence. Just as Tao Qian credits his bucolic surrounding with insulating him from the "vulgar tone" of the city and allowing him to regain his intrinsic self, so Emerson lauds the restorative power of nature on the workaday soul: "To the body and mind which have

been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again."<sup>21</sup> For both Tao Qian and Emerson, it is through communion with nature that humankind can get in touch with the sacred core of their beings.

### Correspondence between Topos and Ethos

This healing and restorative power of nature is more than physical. The two writers look to nature for existential, intellectual, and moral edification, as well as for poetic and philosophical inspiration. Both find in plants the template of carefree and glorious living. Tao Qian muses in "Spending the Ninth Day in Solitude" < 九日闲居 >:

*Our lives are short and our ambitions many...  
And while one can with wine exorcize all sorrows  
Chrysanthemums know how to restrain declining years.  
How is it with me the thatch-cottage scholar,  
Vainly watching how my time and fate decline?...  
These cold-weather flowers bloom of themselves alone.  
I pull close my lapels and sing to myself at leisure,  
Which somehow distantly awaken deep emotions.  
Even in retirement I do have many pleasure,  
Even in my lassitude I still get things accomplished.<sup>22</sup>*

The poet urges us to learn from chrysanthemums to live with gusto even in adversity, instead of bemoaning unfulfilled ambitions or grieving over declining years. By living life to the brim each morn, implicitly in nature's lap, one can catch intimations, if not of immortality, then at least of vibrant mortality. He sketches comparable scenario in "The Life of the Sire of Five Willows":

As there are five willows beside his abode, he has called himself by such a title. ... His short coats of coarse fabric are patched and knotted, his reed cereal case and gourd shell for liquid food are often empty: but he takes such at his ease. ... He quaffs at his beaker and chants his poems to find happiness in his sublimating will. Isn't he a free, blissful subject of our legendary kings at the dawn of the world, the One of Care-free Rule and the One of Heavenly Grace?<sup>23</sup>

Despite his meager means and threadbare existence, this sire exults at being a free, blissful subject heedless of material abundance or worldly renown.

Nature similarly provides Emerson with virtual majesty: "Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria, the sun-set and moon-rise my Paphos."<sup>24</sup> Regal pomp

and circumstances dwarf beside natural bounty. Roses offer Emerson a lesson congruent with the one the set by chrysanthemums for the Chinese poet:

Man is timid and apologetic; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day.... But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.<sup>25</sup>

The blade of grass and the blowing rose instruct by shining examples how to live with aplomb in the present. Humankind too can bask in the moment, instead of comparing themselves with predecessors, submitting themselves to ancient authority, regretting the past, or fretting about the future. For both Tao Qian and Emerson, the riches that nature affords outweigh any worldly gratifications or recognitions. More than being an ecological boon, living in nature is conducive to self-cultivation.

Cultivating the self is certainly a common goal of Tao Qian and Emerson, both of whom regard nature to be the perfect classroom for this discipline. Far from associating nature with untrammelled wilderness, let alone with the Noble Savage, they are genteel dwellers in the countryside who cherish a life of farming or horticulture and study. Tao Qian's thatched hut is stocked with books; Emerson's journal entries attest to his capacious library. The Chinese bard discloses that he is often so engrossed in his study that "he jovially forgets his meals."<sup>26</sup> He registers in "On Reading the Classic of the Hills and Seas" < 读山海经 > that he looks forward to browsing as his reward after farm work:

*Ploughing is done and also I have sown—  
The time has come to return and read my books. ...  
I read at length the story of King Mu,  
And let my gaze wander over pictures of hills and seas.  
Thus with a glance I reach the ends of the Universe—  
If this is not a pleasure where could I ever find one?"*<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that the ineffable pleasure he derives from reading consists in his being transported vicariously to "hills and seas," that the felicity unleashed by texts is inseparable from his delight in nature.

Nature does more than provide a blueprint for right living. It fosters, in the writing of both Tao Qian and Emerson, as ethic (whether grounded in Daoist or Transcendentalist thinking) deeper than social propriety or

conventional morality. "Peach Blossom Spring" situates the idyllic utopia in a secluded niche away from corrupt officials, ruthless landlords, and greedy merchants. Tao Qian's poetry similarly evinces a synergistic relay between natural and ethical environment, couples ecological asset with moral well being. In "Six Songs of Poor Scholars" < 咏贫士 > he associates a wealthy official life with "real pain," in contrast to the rustic existence of poor scholars:

*A bed of straw was always warm enough,  
And fresh-gathered yams were good enough for  
breakfast...  
Poverty and wealth will always war within us,  
But when the Tao prevails there are no anxious faces.  
Utmost moral power will crown the village entrance  
And purest chastity shine in the western gateway.*<sup>28</sup>

The poem, particularly the last two lines, exhibits a well-known Daoist paradox: "Flex to remain whole; / Bend to be straight; / Empty to be filled; / Be worn and be renewed; / Seek less and have enough; / Seek more and be perplexed... / The self-effacing shines; / The humble becomes distinguished; / The unpretentious are acclaimed."<sup>29</sup> Tao Qian intimates that "utmost moral power" resides in the lowliest abode and "purest chastity" emanates from the humblest quarter. Tucked away in remote mountains and hidden hamlets, Tao Qian's *locus amoenus* is free not only of air pollution but—perhaps more importantly—of political infighting and economic competition. The poet does not, however, downplay the hardship of being indigent. Laments about bitter cold and gnawing hunger can be found in another canto of "Six Songs of Poor Scholars," but the speaker consoles himself by observing that "many ancient sages were situated so!"<sup>30</sup>

Emerson, too, disparages worldly possession and dominion. The connection he draws between ecological environment and ethical conduct also resembles a Daoist paradox: "The farmer imagines power and place are fine things. But the President has paid dear for his White House. It has commonly cost him all his peace, and the best of his manly attributes."<sup>31</sup> His pronouncement, which implies that architectural grandeur and political clout are inversely proportional to inner peace and personal integrity, may have been inspired by Christ's Sermon on the Mount:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom  
of heaven  
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after  
righteousness: for they shall be filled...  
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.  
(Mathew 5:2-8)*

The prospect of the hungry about to be filled matches exactly the Daoist notion: “Empty to be filled.” Unlike the Beatitudes, which promise delayed gratification in the kingdom of heaven, however, the *Book of Tao* conveys the benefit of material abstinence here and now—an idea that accords with both Tao Qian and Emerson. Tao Qian shuns worldly profit and official life for the sake of self-cultivation; Emerson considers “the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, [as] the want of self-reliance.”<sup>32</sup>

Like Tao Qian, Emerson exalts nature as a “discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths” and regards every “natural process [as] a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference.” Everything about a natural landscape can impart a valuable lesson:

What is a farm but a mute gospel? .... Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment which thus scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul. The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him.... Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman? How much tranquility has been reflected to man from the azure sky, over whose unspotted deeps the winds forevermore drive flocks of stormy clouds, and leave no wrinkle or stain?<sup>33</sup>

Nature is a living text of moral truth; the laws of nature translate into moral laws. A fisherman can learn from the sea-beaten rock to stand firm against adversity; a man can learn from the azure sky to remain unruffled and untainted by the storm and stress of the world.

By far the greatest lesson instilled by Nature in Emerson is self-reliance: “Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing and therefore self-relying soul.”<sup>34</sup> He firmly holds that “what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.”<sup>35</sup> Like Tao Qian, he cautions against the pressure of society that induces one to kowtow to power, fame, or fortune: “Society is a joint-stock company . . . in which the members agree, for the better security of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.” Hence the oft-quoted corollary: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Emerson would surely approve

Tao Qian’s decision to insulate himself from the “vulgar tone” so as to resume his natural bent and to engage in self-sufficient husbandry.

We can thus draw many analogies between the transcendentalist notions of self-reliance in Emerson and the reclusive ideas concerning spiritual independence and self-sufficiency in Tao Qian, as well as between their stances against organizational affiliations. The Chinese poet reckons as obstacles to the Way of Dao what the New England sage remonstrates against as impediments to self-trust—dogma, property, government, discontent stemming from regret about the past and anxiety about the future. Both thinkers embrace the paradox of “less is more,” pitching natural living against material comfort, craven security, and obsequious existence.

### Divergent Ideas about Nature, Selfhood, and Solitude

With regard to the definition and interconnection of nature, selfhood, and solitude, we find both striking coincidences and sharp divergences. Both sages not only stress the importance of nature and solitude but also regard studying nature and knowing oneself to be twin pursuits. But their ideas about nature and self veer from each other. Tao Qian sees nature as a haven from feudal administration and official service; he thinks individuals must remove themselves to the countryside to cultivate their native temperament, even as humans are merely insignificant particles in the scheme of things, dissolving back into nature eventually. For Emerson, it is the human mind that must intuit the meaning of the external world and communicate its lessons. He anticipates Darwin’s theory of evolution in designating homo sapiens as the highest form to which nature aspires while proclaiming, against both Darwinian atheism and orthodox Unitarianism, that “God is here within.”<sup>37</sup> Where Tao Qian envisions the self to be living in harmony with nature, Emerson bids the self-reliant individual to explicate the world, generating order out of chaos. The solitude that Tao Qian savors can be found only in the countryside; the kind that Emerson extolls can be found anywhere by the self-possessed.

Tao Qian associates nature and solitude with the countryside, but not with a hermetic existence. His idea of solitude involves distancing oneself from hubs of power and commerce, but it does not preclude the enjoyment of family and friends. He reveals in “Retracing My Way Home” < 归去来辞 > that despite ending his “intercourse with the world,” he continues to be “pleased with the feeling words of . . . kin and friends.”<sup>38</sup> His pastoral poems describe the hard work of a farmer providing for his kin: “I have never yet utterly failed my family / Even though cold and hungry / they always had bran and gruel. / How can I expect more than to fill my belly?”<sup>39</sup>

But he also celebrates the joys of being surrounded by children: "Now I hold hands with a train of nieces and nephews, / Parting the hazel growth we tread the untilled wastes."<sup>40</sup> Above all, he revels in drinking with neighbors and friends: "Fond of wine, he is too poor to resort to it often; knowing this, his kin and friends would invite him to bumpers."<sup>41</sup> The poet is a "hermit" only in the Chinese sense of choosing to live in a rural area, but still within human earshot. What is of utmost importance to him is the freedom to follow his heart's desire, as celebrated in "Retracing My Way Home: A Prose Poem" [归来辞]:

To be wealthy and to be high in rank are not what I wish; to be in the celestial city is not what I expect. I may wish to go somewhere on a fair day alone, or to weed and manure the soil... Or I may wish to rise on the eastern bank to halloo in easing my heart, or to compose poetry by the side of a limpid stream. In such wise, I may merge into Nature and come to my end, delighting in the decree of heaven and doubting nought.<sup>42</sup>

Whether fertilizing the soil, composing by a stream, or dissolving back into the earth, the poet here is very much a part of the scenery.

Tao Qian and Emerson share a free spirit that wishes above all to be true to themselves and their inward promptings. Like the Chinese poet, who refuses to "grovel" for a living, Emerson refuses to ingratiate himself: "If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions... But so may you give these friends pain. Yes, but I cannot sell my liberty and my power, to save their sensibility." He values honesty and liberty far above tact. He will harken to the voice of his mind and do "whatever inly rejoices [him] and the heart appoints."<sup>43</sup> Neither Tao Qian nor Emerson is willing to pay hypocritical attention to those they dislike. Just as Tao Qian will rise spontaneously on the eastern bank and halloo to ease his heart, Emerson will do whatever his heart appoints.

Nature for both men is the repository of knowledge and self-knowledge. Emerson writes: "The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows... The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages."<sup>44</sup> He believes that nature and the human soul are rooted in the same order, that a law of nature is also a law of the human mind, so much so that "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."<sup>45</sup>

It is not always easy, however, to nail down this lay philosopher's ideas owing to his contempt for consistency. While Emerson identifies the open air as the ideal

setting for solitary communion and for learning in *Nature* (1836), his first book, and in his famous lecture "The American Scholar" (1837), he opines in a later essay, also entitled "Nature" (1949), that nature is ubiquitous:

If we consider how much we are nature's, we need not be superstitious about towns, as if that terrific or benefic force did not find us there also, and fashion cities. Nature who made the mason, made the house. We may easily hear too much of rural influences. The cool disengaged air of natural objects, makes them enviable to us chafed and irritable creatures with red faces, and we think we shall be as grand as they, if we camp out and eat roots; but let us be men instead of woodchucks, and the oak and the elm shall gladly serve us, though we sit in chairs of ivory on carpets of silk.<sup>46</sup>

In this piece nature and solitude are no longer confined to bucolic locales but is within reach everywhere, even in an ornate boudoir, for ivory and silk are also natural products. Nature even evaporates or cycles as "thought" in this essay: "Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas." Hence "every moment instructs, and every object: for wisdom is infused into every form."<sup>47</sup> The alert mind can be illuminated by any external objects, including those found indoors or in cities. Nature in this later essay encompasses just about everything under the sun.

If Emerson defines nature much more broadly in his later work, his idea of solitude, which is increasingly allied with self-reliance, becomes more and more a function of the inner self: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."<sup>48</sup> Solitude is almost synonymous with independence here. This solipsistic mindset, linked to a firm individual conviction unshaken by popular opinions, must remain intact even when one is surrounded by a rabble.

Emerson thus goes much farther than Tao Qian in his insistence on self-amplifying solitude. Unlike the Chinese poet, who never shuns family and friends, Emerson holds that the mental state essential for self-reliance must preclude any extrinsic interference, including that of one's closest kin:

Your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation. At times the whole world seems to be in conspiracy to importune you with emphatic trifles. Friend, client, child ... all knock at once at thy closet door... But keep thy state; come not into their confusion.... Say to them, 'O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after ap-

pearances hitherto. Henceforward I am the truth's. Be it known unto you that henceforward I obey no law less than the eternal law... I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you."<sup>49</sup>

Unlike Tao Qian, who remains mindful of his duties to his family, Emerson contends that one must turn a deaf ear to all immanent demands when the transcendentalist spirit beckons. The enjoinder to "keep thy state" seems to pun on "state" of mind and a sovereign "state": an individual must hold his own mind supreme like that of a sovereign who does not have to heed anyone else. The next injunction, couched in biblical language, to parents, sibling, and friend to leave the speaker alone further elevates this sovereign into the role of the Son of God, for it echoes twelve-year-old Jesus's response to his mother. The teen, unbeknownst to his parents, had stayed behind in the temple in Jerusalem. Upon being rebuked, he reposted: "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Just as Christ's retort implies that his unique relationship with God supersedes his relationship with his earthly parents, so Emerson suggests that individuals should get their priorities straight by answering first to the God within.

Although both Tao Qian and Emerson envision Nature as a teacher that instructs individuals, they differ in their ideas concerning the relationship between self and nature. As Tao Qian's line about merging eventually into nature suggests, the Chinese poet subscribes to the Daoist worldview in which "man is not separated from nature either by intellectual discrimination or by emotional response; he is one with nature, and lives with it in harmony."<sup>50</sup> The poet thus quietly blends with nature, as in traditional Chinese paintings where human figures are often tiny specks overshadowed by grand landscapes.

In stark contrast to Tao Qian, who is content to lead a self-effacing pastoral existence, Emerson sees nature as "thoroughly mediate," subject to human orchestration:

It is meant to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful... One after another his victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will, —the double of the man.<sup>51</sup>

The last line, with its megalomaniac sense of nature as the realized will of humankind, would never be uttered by Tao Qian or any traditional Chinese poet, not even the grandiloquent Li Bai or Su Shi. Emerson deems an enlightened person to be "the creator in the finite,"<sup>52</sup> with ascendancy over nature, which will remain nebulous and inchoate till it is quickened by God-given

human intelligence. While individuals can learn from nature, they must first invest the universe with meanings.

Writing centuries after Tao Qian, Emerson has also incorporated scientific knowledge in his understanding of the world, as the epigraph for the 1849 edition of *Nature* testifies:

*A subtle chain of countless rings  
The next unto the farthest brings;  
The eye reads omens where it goes,  
And speaks all languages the rose;  
And, striving to be man, the worm  
Mounts through all the spires of form.*<sup>53</sup>

The chain at first glance resembles the Chain of Being in Renaissance British literature. But upon close examination, it looks not so much backward to the Elizabethan world picture as forward to Darwin's evolutionary theory. Instead of depicting humankind clambering up the ladder to the galaxy, "man" in this Emersonian hierarchy is the highest order of beings toward which the worm inches upward. Furthermore, while natural objects such as the rose and the worm embody fundamental lessons, it is the human eye that divines these omens where it goes. Nature itself cannot deliver any message without the human intuition that makes sense of external phenomena.

Because Emerson sees human beings as endowed with godly intelligence, cultivation of the self takes on very different forms than those found in Confucian or Daoist literature. In Confucian culture, self-cultivation is often associated with self-control, self-restraint, even self-abnegation, and with learning one's place in a social and political hierarchy. Although Daoism gives much freer reign to the individual spirit, this self, as one minuscule cog in the universal wheel, must not strive for a discrete existence. In the words of Joseph Levenson and Franz Schurmann:

Nature is not merely observed, for observation implies separation of ego and object—a separation which, for the Daoists, isolates the self, thus condemning it to the striving they hold vain and to the suffering they see as the inevitable concomitant. It is identification with nature that banishes consciousness, a consciousness that in the last analysis is always and ominously of self.<sup>54</sup>

This Daoist construal of self, which has found its way into much of Tao Qian's poetry, is anathema to Emerson.

The Eastern and Western configurations of self and of the relation between self and nature are in some way encapsulated in the works of Tao Qian and Emerson. William Acker's translation of one of Tao Qian's poems reflects this very dissonance:

*Renouncing my cap of office I will return to my old home  
Never more entangled with love for high position.  
I will nourish my REAL self under my gates and thatch  
And by doing this be all the better known.*<sup>55</sup>

The line rendered as “I will nourish my real self” is at variance with the Chinese expression “养真”—nurture natural disposition and cultivate truth—ironically betraying the Western bias of the translator. In the Chinese idiom, nurturing disposition and cultivating truth are cognate pursuits, so that the idea of a “self” discrete from “truth” is notably absent. Tao Qian implies that living close to nature is conducive to improving one’s character precisely because it can be at one with the environment. By the same token, the line rendered as “be all the better known” really means “so honor redounds on me.” What the poet desires is not worldly prestige but a sense of honor. Tao Qian may be echoing a saying in *Analects*: “Be not grieved that you are not known, but seek to be worthy of being known.”<sup>56</sup> The distinction is important because elsewhere Tao Qian has lamented that “The Tao has been lost... And people everywhere are misers of their feelings... And think of nothing save keeping their reputation.”<sup>57</sup> Tao Qian is unlikely to be equally guilty. A.R. Davis’s translation of these lines—“I’ll cultivate truth ‘under a cross-beam door’; / So may I make myself a name for goodness”<sup>58</sup>—though slightly awkward, is, in my opinion, closer to the original Chinese meaning.

Where solitude connotes pastoral reclusiveness and ascetic existence in Tao Qian’s poetry, it is linked primarily to intellectual independence in Emerson’s writing. Self-cultivation amounts to developing complete trust in one’s intuition, to the degree of making light of the teachings of past saints and savants and being deaf to the criticism of one’s peers. Instead of seeing humans as dissolvable specks in the universe, Emerson contends that “a true man... *is the center of things*. Where he is, there is nature.”<sup>59</sup> Nothing is grander than the self-reliant human soul, which even sets off “the poverty of nature and fortune beside our native riches.”<sup>60</sup> Because the mind is its own place for Emerson, solitude does not entail actual mountain retreat: “Think alone, and all places are friendly and sacred. The poets who have lived in cities have been hermits still. Inspiration makes solitude anywhere.”<sup>61</sup>

The restive independence Emerson champions differs from Tao Qian’s pragmatic self-sufficiency. Urging individuals to harken to their own callings without dreading public censure or hankering after popular acclaim, he famously exhorts: “Hitch your wagon to the star.” He uses this sidereal axiom twice (once with a different possessive) in *Society and Solitude*: “Now that is the wisdom of a man, in every instance of his labor, to hitch his wagon to a star, and see his chore done by the gods themselves.” And again: “Hitch your wagon to a

star. Let us not fag in paltry works which serve our pot and bag alone. ... Work rather for those interests which the divinities honor and promote.”<sup>62</sup> Deployed in the first instance to describe human ingenuity in harnessing the forces of the elements and in the second to inspire humankind to harbor high principles, in common usage the phrase is often used as an exhortation to pursue lofty enterprises.

Although both Tao Qian and Emerson view knowing oneself and knowing nature as inextricably intertwined, the grand entelechy signaled by Emerson’s starry metaphor differs from Tao Qian’s humble if occasionally epicurean pursuit. In place of the boundless confidence of American lecturer, who proclaims, “Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense” and “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string,” Tao Qian describes himself as “spare of speech,” writing merely “to please himself and show his bent.”<sup>63</sup>

### Relationship between Self and Civil Society

The most noticeable difference between the two pastoral enthusiasts is their relationship to the world of affairs. Tao Qian abstains completely from civil society and ensconces himself in rural backwater. He goes so far as to change his name from Tao Yuanming to Tao Qian—Qian meaning “hiding” or “submerging”—signifying his resolve to remove himself from the public eye and to avoid the tarnishing effects of society.

Emerson, according to Christy, is nudged by his friends to do the same: “[Amos Bronson] Alcott might have begged him to enter the ill-fated Fruitlands venture. Thoreau was considering Walden.” Both Fruitlands and Walden are reminiscent of the Utopian Peach Blossoms Spring. Instead of imagining Emerson wavering between Laozi and Confucius, Christy, citing his journal of 1843, fancies the New England sage staunchly aligning himself with Confucius, “with Alcott and Thoreau as Chang Tsoo and Kee Neih”:

*Reform.* Chang Tsoo and Kee Neih retired from the state to the fields on account of misrule, and showed their displeasure at Confucius who remained in the world. Confucius sighed and said, “I cannot associate with birds and beasts. If I follow not man, whom shall I follow?”<sup>64</sup>

Emerson, despite his insistence on resolute intellectual freedom, is scrupulously mindful of Confucian duty to the state. Although he reproves a controlling political organ (“the State must follow, and not lead the character and progress of the citizen”), he continues to be a public intellectual after his resignation as Unitarian minister.

Emerson decrees that a true thinker must not retreat from a commonplace world but must assay to usher in a brave new world:

Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works.... Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age.... A man Caesar is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius.... An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man...and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.<sup>65</sup>

As opposed to retiring from society, Emerson implores us to “affront and reprimand,” to remove obstacles to progress, to affirm the conviction that society has always been transformed by remarkable individuals such as Caesar and Christ, and therefore every human has the potential to become a vanguard. Instead of succumbing to institutional constraints, a great leader can overhaul the institution itself.

He further expounds on the social obligations of a seminal mind in “The American Scholar”:

There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian,—as unfit for any handiwork or public labor as a penknife for an axe.... Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth... Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.<sup>66</sup>

Thinking and living, according to Emerson, must go hand in hand. The office of this scholar of action “is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances.”<sup>67</sup> He must think for himself and forego the “pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, and the religion of society,” he must bear the cross of being contrary, endure poverty and solitude, and “the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society.” He can only take as consolation the awareness that he is the repository of wisdom for others, exercising the highest human functions: “He is the world’s eye. He is the world’s heart.”<sup>68</sup> As such, the American scholar is obligated to communicate the noblest thoughts and sentiments to the public.

Emerson himself never retracts from his self-appointed mission as the world’s eye and heart, as the seer and conscience of his age; he continues to bring his considerable talents to bear on flashpoint events of his time. Carl Bode observes that much as Emerson “begrudged acting as a public man,” he spoke out against three major political issues during his prime: the expulsion of the Cherokees from Georgia, the war against Mexico, and slavery.<sup>69</sup> As the contributor to *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography* puts it, “It is no slight sign of the greatness of the thinker, that he can leave the amenities of the city and the quietudes of the forest to stand upon the anti-slavery platform. The subordination of the pursuit of a thought to the love of a duty thus manifested, may be accepted as the crowning lesson in the life and works of Emerson.”<sup>70</sup>

### Nature, Spirit, and Writing

Having discussed the points of convergence and divergence in these two pillars of Chinese and American letters, I would like to turn to their metaphysics and aesthetics, which are no less informed by their reverence for nature. Despite a spiritual note that often accompanies both of their compositions, and the many Daoist and biblical allusions in their respective writing, neither writer devotes much thought, if at all, to life after death. Their works, presented in limpid and unadorned verse and prose free of abstruse allusions, seem natural growths from the soil of the old China and the New England. Instead of citing precedents and bowing to traditional authority, they appeal to firsthand experience and intuition. In both we find a tonic blend of piety and irreverence.

The Chinese poet openly embraces the beliefs of Dao as moral and eternal, but he steers clear of Zhuangzi’s mysticism and occult folk practices associated with Daoism, such as the search for elixir for immortality via alchemy. It is quite clear from his work that he does not give any credence to an afterlife. “To be in the celestial city is not what I expect,” quoth he in “Retracing My Way Home.” He asked rhetorically, “To be born in the morning possessed of Love and Faith / And die at evening, what more could one desire?”<sup>71</sup> The elegy below dispels any lingering doubt about human finitude:

*Where there is life there also must be death...  
Success or failure he [the deceased] will not know again,  
Questions of right or wrong mean nothing to him now.  
In a thousand autumns—after ten thousand years,  
Who will know whether he had glory or disgrace?  
The only pity is while he was in the world  
Of drinking wine he never got enough.<sup>72</sup>*

The sentiment is replicated in “Written on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month of the Year I-yu” < 己酉岁九月九日 >: “From ancient times / there was none but had to die, / Remembering this scorches my very heart. / What is there I can do to assuage this mood? / Only enjoy myself drinking my unstrained wine. / I do not know about a thousand years, / Rather let me make this morning last forever.”<sup>73</sup> Human life in these poems follow the natural rhythm of morning and evening. Though the thought of eventual nothingness sometimes gives rise to melancholy, the poet uses this unpleasant fact to counsel against transient glory and to prompt his readers to make the most of their numbered days.

His recurrent advice is to drink before it is too late. The poet definitely practices what he preaches, as borne out by one of his several poems entitled “Drinking” < 饮酒 >:

*I set up my cottage in the world of men,  
Away from the hubbub of horses and carriages.  
Being asked how it could be thus, I reply,  
“My heart stays apart, so secluded must be the spot.”  
In plucking chrysanthemums beneath the east hedge,  
I vacantly see the southern mountains afar;  
The mountain aura hovereth fair morn and eve,  
The birds fly from and back to their nests early and late.  
There is the pith of truth in all this sight;  
When I am about to say how, I forget my words.<sup>74</sup>*

The poem is deceptive in its simplicity. While the first two quatrains use concrete imagery and informal language to answer a simple question and evoke a rustic scene, the last two lines bring the self-analysis to a philosophical (but not at all didactic) close. The enigmatic couplet invites at least two interpretations. In light of the title, the poet may be too inebriated to find words to flesh out his insight. Or some insights may be too deep for articulation, like those mentioned in “The Book of Tao”: “The Tao that can be expressed in words / Is not the true and eternal Tao.”<sup>75</sup> The “pith of truth” gleaned by the Chinese poet from his nature-watch likewise surpasses language; his epiphany—possibly precipitated by alcohol—must be intuited rather than verbalized.

“Drinking” is emblematic of Tao Qian’s disarming and resonant style, which modulates easily from a descriptive to a philosophical register. He has indicated in his autobiographical sketch that he does not chase after fancy diction or obscure references, that he “takes delight in books, but is not enmeshed in mere words.”<sup>76</sup> On account of his transparency the bard was “slighted by his era’s critics and only fully appreciated by later generations of readers.”<sup>77</sup> Unlike his contemporaries, who flaunt their learning by adhering to rigid conventions,

citing literary authorities, and using esoteric references, Tao Qian writes directly, using down-to-earth expressions and vignettes from country life. In the words of David Hinton, “Tao was the first writer to make poetry of his natural voice and immediate experience, thereby creating the personal lyricism which all major Chinese poets inherited and made their own.”<sup>78</sup> He was keenly admired by Tang poets such as Meng Haoyan and Wang Wei on account of “the freshness of his images, his homespun but Heaven-aspiring morality, and his steadfast love of rural life.”<sup>79</sup>

Tao Qian’s correlation of rustic vista and moral high ground anticipates Emerson’s claim that “particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts” and that “nature is the symbol of spirit.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed Emerson’s ideas about the “Over-soul” or “the eternal One” are almost indistinguishable from Laozi’s and Tao Qian’s delineations of the eternal Dao. Although the one-time Unitarian preacher refers frequently to God in his work, his idea of divinity is much closer to the universal spirit of Dao than to any Christian Godhead:

Spirit...suggests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least. We can foresee God in the coarse...but when we try to define and describe himself, both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages. That essence refuses to be recorded in propositions, when man has worshipped him intellectually, the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it.<sup>81</sup>

Here and elsewhere Emerson posits almost exactly the same Daoist paradox about ineffable truth: “the highest truth on [Intuition] remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition”; “My words do not carry its august sense; they fall short and cold.”<sup>82</sup> The transcendentalist’s assumptions about the Over-soul recall Laozi’s concepts concerning the Tao. These two sets of beliefs have several common denominators: everything is interconnected; the Spirit is accessible to all, whether or not people actively seek it; moral character and action evince that the human and divine spirit are aligned; through self-cultivation one can get closer to the universal spirit.

Like Tao Qian, Emerson is loath to dwell on the afterlife: “Men ask concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven...and so forth... These questions which we lust to ask about the future...God has no answer for them [!]. It is not in an arbitrary ‘decree of God,’ but in the nature of man, that a veil shuts down on the facts of to-morrow....By this veil

which curtains events it instructs the children of men of live in to-day.”<sup>83</sup> Emerson, speaking putatively on behalf of God, dismisses interests in posthumous affairs as “low curiosity” and urges his readers to channel their energy into the here and now: “work and live, work and live.”<sup>84</sup>

Stylistically, Emerson also mirrors Tao Qian’s poetic immediacy, using figurative language spontaneously to provide abstract ideas with welcome clarity. There are even specific echoes in “Self-Reliance” of Tao Qian’s “Drinking.” The Chinese poet does not miss stately conveyances, preferring natural resources. The “pith of truth” for him is embedded in the profuse mountain air that is available throughout the day, in the birds that go out with sunrise and return at sunset. Emerson likewise prefers living in sync with nature to modern luxuries:

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun... and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity, entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue.<sup>85</sup>

Had Emerson been Tao Qian’s coeval, he too would have chosen a secluded spot “away from the hubbub of horses and carriages,” learning to tell time, exercise muscles, cultivate wide virtue, and decipher truth from natural surrounding.

Emerson envisions not only a moral symbiosis between human and nature, but also a homological relation between microcosm and macrocosm, between the inmost and the outermost, so that an autonomous and honorable individual can readily cull moral lessons from the external world:

The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world. A life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause.<sup>86</sup>

Convinced that “every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture,” Emerson is as adept as Tao Qian at drawing inspirations from everyday landscape.<sup>87</sup> In addition to tropes of the sun, rain, stars, blade of grass, blowing rose, and the worm introduced earlier, he has forged piquant conceits in lines such as “the world globes itself in a drop of dew.... God reappears with all

his parts in every moss and cobweb.”<sup>88</sup>

Like Tao Qian, Emerson flouts the authority of the ancients and the foreign influence of his contemporaries, recommending instead an original relationship with the universe. He poses a series of questions in *Nature* (1836):

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of [our predecessors]? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply...why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>89</sup>

This passage, in which Emerson bemoans how veneration for past theories has sapped the creativity of his contemporary generation, is also a stylistic tour de force. He obeys his own precept by seldom citing other authorities to support his observations, confronting us instead with spectacular evidence from the teeming fields. After the series of rhetorical questions, he directs the reader’s eye to the plenitude of the New World with three crisp sentences before ending with a simple exhortation, rendered all the more persuasive by the preceding imagery yoking classical antiquity with the macabre and conjoining personal intuition with cornucopia. The American scholar believes that not books by our forefathers but nature itself should provide individuals with the raw material for philosophy and poetry. Each person must learn to “detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages.”<sup>90</sup> He vouchsafes to mention other worthies of the past only to further illustrate his point: “the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what *they* thought.”<sup>91</sup> These men are great precisely because they disregard their predecessors and contemporaries.

Like Tao Qian, Emerson communicates his thoughts briskly and winsomely. “Self-Reliance” concludes thus:

A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend...raises your spirit, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.<sup>92</sup>

These sentences display a fetching arc. Addressing

the readers, Emerson starts by taking the reader (addressed intimately in the second person) for a seductive rhetorical spin, via a lengthy sentence full of promising scenarios, till she arrives at the summary enjoiner: “Do not believe it.” He then ends with two anaphoric sentences, pounding his message home. The periodical structure and teasing suspense are comparable to the turn of thought in Tao Qian’s “Drinking,” at once playful and soulful, proffering instruction and diversion in equal measure. The metaphysical observations and stylistic maneuvers of these two masters seem part and parcel of their resolute individuality and their enchantment with nature.

## Conclusion

Tao Qian and Emerson speak to us afresh in this materialist age riddled with social pressures and ecological concerns. Though separated by millennia, the two might be considered kindred spirits with singular affinities: propensity for rustic living and seclusion; disdain for establishment, gilded acquisition, and indolent conformity; predilection for self-cultivation and recourse to nature for intellectual and moral guidance; adherence to a spirituality that pertains to the here and now; preference for a plain style not laden with erudite allusions or external authorities. Because of their divergent notions of selfhood, however, the two envisage the relationship between self and nature and between self and society differently. Although both thinkers conceive their duty to mankind as being true to themselves, Tao Qian sees the self to be a relatively insignificant “shadow” subsumed by natural landscape (“Vast and majestic, mountains embrace your shadow”), whereas Emerson underscores the importance of a unique human spirit in radiating divine wisdom and transmitting a higher ethic. Tao Qian can find solitude only in the countryside; Emerson holds that where “a true man is ... there is nature.” Instead of retreating from society, he continues to denounce benighted practices and policies. Still, the two aficionados of solitude share a profound belief in the intercourse of mindscape and landscape. They see the visible world as an “open book” awaiting to be apprehended by a soul attuned to its lessons, whether during a moment of heightened (if occasionally tipsy) reverie or in a flash of intuition.

<sup>1</sup> Jack Keruac’s “Running Through (Chinese Poem Song),” for example, contains the lines “No body has respect / for the self centered/Irresponsible wine invalid. / Everybody wants to be strapped/ in a hopeless space suit where they can’t move. / I urge you, China / go back to Li Po and Tao Yuan Ming.” <http://archive.neopoet.com/node/1075> (Sept 7, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Tao Yuanming, “The Life of the Sire of Five Willows,” in 孙大雨 Sun Dayu, ed. & trans., 《古诗文英译集》 / *An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1995, p. 73; Chinese original on p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> T’ao Ch’ien, “Six Poems Written while Drunk” and “Five Poems on

Returning to Dwell in the Country,” in William Acker, trans., T’ao the Hermit: *Sixty Poems by T’ao Ch’ien*. London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 65, 56; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》页 65, 28. All English citations of Tao Qian are to Acker’s text unless otherwise stated.

<sup>4</sup> T’ao Ch’ien, “Five Poems on Returning to Dwell in the Country,” in Acker, pp. 52-53; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》页 24 – 25.

<sup>5</sup> See Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930; Arthur Christy, *The Orient In American Transcendentalism: A Study Of Emerson, Thoreau, And Alcott*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Lyman V. Cady, “Thoreau’s Quotations from the Confucian Books in *Walden*,” *American Literature* 33.1 (1961): p. 20. Cady makes a convincing case from textual evidence that Thoreau is also familiar with G. Pauthier’s *Les Livres sacrés de L’Orient* (1841), a French translation of the Four Books.

<sup>7</sup> Christy, *The Orient In American Transcendentalism*, pp. 45, 317.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia*, p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> David T.Y. Chen, “Thoreau and Daoism,” in C.D. Narasimhaiah, ed. *Asian Response to American Literature*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972, p. 409.

<sup>11</sup> Lao Tzu, “The Book of Tao,” Chapter 4, in Gu Zhengkun, trans. & annotated, *The Book of Tao and Teh*. Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp., 2013, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in Carl Bode and Malcolm Cowley, ed. *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Penguin, 1979), pp. 149-150; all citations from Emerson are to *The Portable Emerson unless otherwise stated*. Emerson is also very much influenced by British poets (e.g. Wordsworth and Coleridge) whose works reflect Eastern philosophical currents.

<sup>13</sup> Gu Zhengkun, “Lao Zi and His Philosophical System: An Introduction,” in Gu Zhengkun, trans. & annotated, *The Book of Tao and Teh*. Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp., 2013, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Tao Ch’ien, “Peach Blossom Spring,” in Cyril Birch, ed. *Anthology of Chinese Literature, Vol. 1: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century*. New York: Grove Press, 1965, 167-168; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 136 – 137.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in 萧统, <陶渊明传>, 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1982, p. 2; my English translation.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Bode, “Introduction,” in *The Portable Emerson*. New York: Penguin, 1979, p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Emerson, “Politics” (1844), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*. New York: Random House, 2006, p. 254.

<sup>18</sup> Leo Marx, “Pastoralism in America,” in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, ed. *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Emerson, *Nature* (1836), in Carl Bode and Malcolm Cowley, ed. *The Portable Emerson*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> T’ao Ch’ien, “Five Poems on Returning to Dwell in the Country,” in Acker, p. 52; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 24; Emerson, *Nature*, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> T’ao Ch’ien, “Spending the Ninth Day in Solitude,” in Acker, pp. 50-51; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 22.

<sup>23</sup> Tao Yuanming, “The Life of the Sire of Five Willows,” in 孙大雨 Sun Dayu, ed. & trans., 《古诗文英译集》 / *An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1995, pp. 73, 75; Chinese original on pp. 72, 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>25</sup> Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” p.151.

<sup>26</sup> Tao Yuan-ming, “The Life of the Sire of Five Willows,” p. 72.

<sup>27</sup> T’ao Ch’ien, “On Reading the Classic of the Hills and Seas,” in

Acker, pp. 99-100; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 129.

<sup>28</sup> T'ao Ch'en, "Six Songs of Poor Scholars," in Acker, p. 132; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 118.

<sup>29</sup> Laozi, "The Book of Tao," Chapter 22, in Gu Zhengkun, trans. & annotated, *The Book of Tao and Teh*. Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp., 2013, p. 58; my English translation.

<sup>30</sup> T'ao Ch'en, "Six Songs of Poor Scholars," in Acker, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Emerson, "Compensation," p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 163.

<sup>33</sup> Emerson, "Nature" (1836), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 153; the imagery of the "bended tree" echoes the Daoist paradox "Bend to be straight" quoted earlier.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>38</sup> Tao Yuanming, "Retracing My Way Home," in Sun Dayu, p. 65; Chinese original on p. 62.

<sup>39</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Seven Miscellaneous Poems," in Acker, trans., p. 78; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 111.

<sup>40</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Five Poems on Returning to Dwell in the Country," p. 56; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 28.

<sup>41</sup> Tao Yuan-ming, "The Life of the Sire of Five Willows," in Sun Dayu, p. 73; Chinese original on p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> Tao Yuanming, "Retracing My Way Home: A Prose Poem," in Sun Dayu, p. 67; Chinese original on p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Emerson, "The American Scholar," p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Emerson, "Nature" (1949), in *Collected Essays: Complete Original Second Series*. Rockville, Maryland: ARC Manor, 2007, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 143.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp. 154-155.

<sup>50</sup> Joseph R. Levenson and Franz Schurmann, *China: An Interpretive History: From the Beginnings to the Fall of Han*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 112.

<sup>51</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup> Levenson and Schurmann, *China*, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Written in the Seventh Month of the Year Hsin-chou while Passing T'u-k'ou in the Night on my Way back to Chiang-ling for my vacation" [辛丑岁七月赴假还江陵夜行途口] in Acker, p. 111; Chinese original in A.R. Davis, *Tao Yuan-ming: His Works and Their Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Vol. II, pp. 70-71.

<sup>56</sup> *Analects*, IV.14; in David Collie, trans., *The Chinese Classical Work Commonly Called the Four Books*. Malacca: Mission Press, 1828, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Six Poems Written While Drunk," in Acker, p. 65; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 65.

<sup>58</sup> A.R. Davis, ed., *Tao Yuan-ming: His Works and Their Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Vol. I, p. 83.

<sup>59</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 147.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Emerson, "Literary Ethics," *Essays and Lectures*, p. 58.

<sup>62</sup> Emerson, *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters* (1862). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2008, pp. 25, 27.

<sup>63</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," pp. 138, 139; Tao Yuan-ming, "The Life of the Sire of Five Willows," in Sun Dayu, p. 73.

<sup>64</sup> Christy, *The Orient In American Transcendentalism*, p. 126; Journals

of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909, VI, p. 403;

<sup>65</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," pp. 147-148.

<sup>66</sup> Emerson, "The American Scholar," p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>69</sup> Carl Bode, "Introduction," p. xvi.

<sup>70</sup> *The Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography: A Series of Distinguished Memoirs of Distinguished Men, of All Ages and All Nations*, Part 4. London: William Mackenzie, 1857, p. 245.

<sup>71</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Six Songs of Poor Scholars," in Acker, p. 130.

<sup>72</sup> T'ao Ch'ien, "Three Songs Written in Imitation of Ancient Bears' Songs," in Acker, pp. 101-102.

<sup>73</sup> "Written on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month of the Year I-yu," in Acker, pp. 121-22; Chinese original in 徐巍 (编): 《陶渊明诗选》, 页 58.

<sup>74</sup> Tao Yuanming, "Drinking," in Sun Dayu, ed. & trans., *An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry*, p. 77; Chinese original on p. 76.

<sup>75</sup> Lao Tzu, "The Book of Tao," in Gu Zhengkun, trans. & annotated, *The Book of Tao and Teh*. Beijing: China Publishing Group Corp., 2013, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Tao Yuan-ming, "The Life of the Sire of Five Willows," p. 73; Chinese original on p. 72.

<sup>77</sup> Stuewe, "T'ao Ch'ien," p. 2071.

<sup>78</sup> David Hinton, "Introduction," in *The Selected Poems of T'ao Ch'ien*, trans. David Hinton. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 2073.

<sup>80</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> Emerson, *Nature*, p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 152; "The Over-Soul," p. 211.

<sup>83</sup> Emerson, "The Over-Soul," pp. 219-220; my exclamation mark.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 162.

<sup>86</sup> *Nature* (1836), p. 25.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Emerson, "Compensation," p. 171.

<sup>89</sup> Emerson, *Nature* (1836), p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Emerson, "Self-Reliance," p. 139.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pp. 138-39.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

#### About the author:

King-Kok Cheung received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley in 1984 and is now a professor in the department of English at UCLA. Her research interests include American Ethnic Literatures, Asian American Literature, Chinese and Chinese American Literature, Renaissance British Literature (Shakespeare and Milton), World Literature (Comparative Odysseys and Comparative Heroic Traditions), gender studies. She is on the International Advisory Boards of *Feminist Studies in English Literature* (Korea) and *EuroAmerica* (Taiwan). She is also an associate editor of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and a Guest Research Fellow at the Chinese American Literature Research Center, Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Prominent transcendentalists included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Orestes Brownson, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Convers Francis, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Henry Hedge, Sylvester Judd, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Jones Very. History. The publication of Emerson's 1836 essay Nature is usually taken to be the watershed moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Emerson wrote in his essay "The American Scholar": "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our