

Emersonian Identity and the Oneness of Educational Relations

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“Relation and connection are not somewhere and sometimes, but everywhere and always.”¹

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“... all our education aims to sink what is individual or personal in us.”²

Ralph Waldo Emerson

INTRODUCTION

In his 2012 PES Presidential Address, “No Education without Hesitation: Exploring the Limits of Educational Relations,” Gert Biesta questions the risk of an overdetermined account of educational relations. He writes: “to say that there is and can be no education without relation is not entirely without risk.”³ Biesta does not overtly oppose the claim “No Education without Relation” (a claim made by Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin in a book that includes a chapter by Biesta), but he does caution the reader in the following words:

... the risk is that, by focusing too much on the relational dimensions of education, we lose sight of the gaps, the fissures, and the disjunctions, the disconnections, and the strangeness that are part of educational processes and practices as well; and, more importantly, we run the risk of losing

sight of the educational significance of these dimensions.

While Biesta would go on to extol risk in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* two years later, his sense of caution about an overly relational account of education is made more interesting when considering his call a year earlier, “to make some room for the idea of ‘transcendence’ within the conversation of philosophy of education.”⁴

In the present essay, we would like to join Biesta in questioning the relational account of education, albeit from a different angle. Rather than worry about an overdetermined sense of relation for education, we will show an account of identity and relation that should put all relational notions of education at risk of underdetermination. This risk will not be addressed through direct comparison and critique. Instead, we will work through a close reading of the notion of identity we find in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like Biesta, we ultimately seek to affirm the dictum “no education without relation” by questioning its premises. We also develop our affirmation through a serious consideration of transcendence with a close look at an Emersonian account of transcendental identity. Our overview of the Emersonian account of identity will conclude with speculative considerations of what this might entail for the relational aspect of education which, we agree, is its *sine qua non*.

EMERSONIAN IDENTITY

In his introduction to *Nature*, Emerson makes a distinction between the Soul and Nature. He regards the latter as encompassing everything outside of the Soul, as “not me.” He writes:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.⁵

This passage might suggest that Emerson is speaking rhetorically and even

sarcastically about the philosophical distinction of the “NOT ME” from the Soul. (The expression “not me” is not original to Emerson; he borrowed it from Thomas Carlyle.) In the passage that immediately follows he clarifies his meaning: “I shall use the word [Nature] in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import.”⁶ On this view, then, the “NOT ME” is the philosophically externalized other that celebrates Nature as everything outside and beyond the self, including, as we have seen, “both nature and art, all other men and my own body.”⁷ Emerson’s externalized account of Nature here is meant to extol it, and develop from that elevated yet divided place his doctrine of transcendentalism. Here the self appears as a solitary figure reaching out to the cosmos on the other side. When referring to the stars at night, Emerson says “they are inaccessible.”⁸ This inaccessibility follows from the philosophical “NOT ME” that divides the Soul from Nature in this Emersonian account.

It is crucial to note that division does not isolate for Emerson. He elaborates, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them.”⁹ From this divided state of twoness, the soul seeks unity and oneness—but this search begins in a twofold and perhaps even dualistic account of nature. Yet, even in this moment of communion with the nonhuman other—“between man and the vegetable”—an insuperable barrier is placed between the identity of Emerson’s “man” (the “I”) and the “vegetable” (the “them”). Though connected in their “occult relation,” Emerson is not one with the vegetable or any other “NOT ME” of Nature. They are transcendently related, but this sense of relation is a relation that begins in twoness, not oneness. It is a divided account of identity, albeit one that is seeking the sublimation of transcendental unity. This is by no means a limited account of relations, but it is not the most complete and transcendental account we find in Emerson.

Emerson’s twofold ontogenetic account of relations changes into a more fully unified account of oneness as his thought develops. In subsequent works, there is a remarkable shift in Emerson’s notion of the identity of the Soul in relation to the “NOT ME” other. This shift is representative of what

Robert Richardson claims to be “the mature form of Emerson,” refuting the narrow conception of the individualistic and libertarian idea of identity that Emerson is often charged with.¹⁰ This mature Emerson is the one who wrote the following: “When we behold the landscape in a poetic spirit, we do not reckon individuals.”¹¹ It is this mature Emerson, Richardson remarks, who holds the “fundamental conviction of the essential oneness of all things.”¹²

In a series of lectures Emerson gave on the philosophy of history, Richardson writes, “we see Emerson working through a remarkably complete critique of romantic individualism . . . Emerson goes so far as to say that the artist who wishes to create a work that will be generally admired ‘must disindividualize himself.’”¹³ Within his published works, glimpses of this “mature Emerson” are found as early as the early-middle years, such as in *Nature*, but a steady “insistence on the subordination of the individual to the whole” is found if we read beyond the works Emerson is best known for (which are also the essays that tend to characterize him as an individualist).¹⁴ Essays such as, the “Over-Soul,” “Spiritual Laws,” “Circles,” “History,” “Plato,” “The Method of Nature,” “Illusions,” and “Fate” all reveal a transcendentalism that is not reducible or compatible with American individualism or libertarianism of any kind.

Emerson’s account of relations eventually drops Carlyle’s “NOT ME” entirely and replaces it with his own expression, “other me.” In a lecture that would be published as the essay “The American Scholar”—which Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to as the “National Intellectual Declaration of Independence”—delivered one year after the publication of *Nature*, Emerson asserts, “The world,—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around.”¹⁵ Here we catch a glimpse of the metaphysical relation between the world and the self-described in terms that emphasize the extension of the spiritual soul over and inside the world as a shadow; the wideness of that worldly extension is another (literally “an other”) manifestation of the self. In “The American Scholar” Emerson begins to hint at something quite different from the “NOT ME” of *Nature*; in its place an *other me* is emerging. That which was once excluded as “NOT ME” is now included as an *other me*, existing in the otherness

of the world, beyond my ensouled identity, yet still as an extension of that same identity.

This shift is still rooted firmly in nature, even more so than before, emphasizing the interrelationships and interactions of living organisms. In “Fate,” Emerson writes:

... observe how far the roots of every creature run, or find, if you can, a point where there is no thread of connection. Our line is consentaneous and far-related. This knot of nature is so well tied, that nobody was ever cunning enough to find the two ends. Nature is intricate, overlapped, interwaved, and endless.¹⁶

In this passage, Emerson recognizes the deep entanglements of “every creature” in the processes and systems of the natural world, processes that include the human person. The *other me* is not an “other” identity because the point at which these entities separate and delineate is indeterminate; the part of me that exists in the other is a constitutive and spiritual reality of my own identity. Gone is the dualistic twoness of the relation between Soul and Nature. They are now an infinite totality. This not only changes Emerson’s account of Nature, it also radically adjusts his notion of the Soul to the Over-soul. For the purposes of our paper, this shifts his account of the relation from one of twofold betweenness to one of absolute unity.

For Emerson, all matter in the material world—trees, bears, plants, humans, insects—emanates from the same universal spirit; the Over-soul is manifest in all worldly things. “The great soul has enshrined itself in some other form,” writes Emerson, and “is now the flower and head of all living nature.”¹⁷ The Over-soul is divine and immortal; it is an omnipresent spirit, the source and cause of all of nature. The Over-soul is not my soul, as an individuated entity of singular identity. Nor is the Over-soul a concept of soul exclusively and uniquely held by humans. It is too large, contains too much, and is contained, in turn, by all. As Emerson writes in “Compensation,” “The soul *is*. Under all this running sea of circumstance ... lies the aboriginal abyss

of real Being.”¹⁸ Since the Over-soul is expressed in and by all life-forms in the biosphere and beyond, nothing can identify itself apart from other forms in nature. In “Over-soul,” he writes:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE . . . We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul.¹⁹

In this sense, human beings are not simply *one of*, but *one with*, the billions of organisms through which the Over-soul has externalized itself. The other is but another, an *other me*. For Emerson, the word ‘identity’ is a relational expression.

The Over-soul is the source of Emerson’s philosophy of identity—“identity” is the term he uses to express unity or oneness. Conversely, Emerson uses the terms “variety” and “difference” as inverse and contrary to unity and identity. The Over-soul resides in all we see as different, or other, converting its appearance as “NOT ME” into a more substantial *other me*. The analogy between these ideas and other mystical and noetic metaphysical notions in Platonism and Hinduism were not lost on Emerson.²⁰ In “Plato,” he writes, “We unite all things by perceiving the law which pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances. . . . This very perception of identity or oneness recognizes the differences of things. Oneness and otherness.”²¹ Everything in the world that presents or appears as different—every person and thing in the natural world—is a divine artifact for Emerson, evidence of the variety and diversity that the Over-soul has generated. Yet all of this diversity and variance can be traced to and through this one source, this one cause. “Truth,” he writes, “is altogether wholesome; that we have hope to search out what might be the very self of everything.”²² Emerson’s point is not to ignore or gloss over difference; the deeper point is to try to understand the depth of diversity when placed within the larger context of being—the unity that holds difference together as one. While differences appear

everywhere in the physical world, they come together for Emerson through the consciousness of the underlying, guiding spirit that unites all. “There are no fixtures to men,” he writes, “if we appeal to consciousness.”²³ All Emersonian categories and boundaries erode in the reality of identity as a unity, as oneness, not twoness. In this account of identity as a transcendental relation, we find our inspiration.

For Emerson, humans are uniquely positioned to perceive oneness as they are the conduit between the celestial and the earthly. Put differently, human consciousness represents the inseparability of the world of transcendental unity and the world of biodiversity. Like all forms of physical matter, humans embody the soul but, for Emerson, human consciousness plays a unique role in the synthesis of the biological and spiritual. The human being is what Emerson called “the divine animal who carries us through this world.”²⁴ We are the point through which “Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety.”²⁵ This intermediary role of the “divine animal” makes us not completely or totally “human,” at least not in the sense that we have come to understand the human, as set apart from all nonhuman others.

If the world is *other me*, and if that *other me* is conceived as nonhuman, mediated by the human but not dependent on it entirely, then the collapsing of the self into the other has implications that are just as radical for what it means to identify as human as for what identity means in general. Whether emphasizing spiritual oneness or ecological connection, the “pretensions” of the self, as Emerson put it, are “fading with the rest.”²⁶ For him, “fading with the rest” is not solely or even primarily “fading with the rest” of the *other mes* who are human. His point is not simply to recognize my human self in another human self—this species-to-species relation is too limited for Emerson’s account. Emerson’s *other me* is not only human; it is also other-than-human. As he writes in “The Method of Nature,” we can “never be quite strangers or inferiors in nature. It is flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone.”²⁷ To know the human self and the nonhuman *other me*, and the relation of oneness between them, is to understand that what makes us human is not the appearance of difference but to know more deeply the extent to which the nonhuman *other*

me is in the human, and vice versa, in a relation of mutual identity and oneness. This account from Emerson is, on our view, a more radical communion than the accounts of common union in more standard accounts of strictly human relations.

In “Circles,” an essay about the concentric and mutable nature of a world always in flux, Emerson writes, “I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall.”²⁸ “I am God in nature” signifies that we are divine manifestations of the nonhuman soul living in the world of matter. “I am a weed by the wall” signifies we are the effects or products of the bio- and ecological community—emerging organisms in the world. For Emerson, we are united with the omnipotent and divine in the same unified way that we are one with the plantly and the minute; equal are the effects of soul and of biology, fully spiritual and fully material. “I am God in nature” is a different expression than “I am part of God,” as expressed in the earlier *Nature*, where Emerson ends the well-known transparent eyeball passage with the phrase “I am part or particle of God.”²⁹ With this the line from the later “Circles”—“I am God”—the “mature Emerson” is gesturing beyond a merely relational connection and toward a transcendental state of being in relation—a oneness with and in all. Emerson is indicating a radical ontological breakdown of lines of demarcation between human and nonhuman and, indeed, between entities altogether. Identity and relation become interchangeable terms.

This view that humans, in soul and matter, comprise and are comprised by the nonhuman in a way that does not identify them over or against a “NOT ME,” the view that we are both divine and creaturely, leads Emerson to do something uncharacteristic of 19th century humanist writers. He tests and breaks the binary of human self and animal other, while also exceeding the more typically distinguishable accounts of identity and relationality that emerge from this binary. When Emerson writes “I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle and fox,” he is identifying with the nonhuman animal that makes up the human animal, including the “lowliest” of animal life as *other me*.³⁰ Here the term ‘animal’ refers to both the animate and ensouled (*anima*) and the animal in the more biological sense of the term. Further, alluding to a

deep sense of biological and ecological connection with the *other me*, Emerson writes, “every animal of the barn-yard, the field, and the forest, of the earth and of the waters that are under the earth, has contrived to get a footing and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers.”³¹ Because of this creaturely imprint, we are not, strictly speaking, *fully* human. We—all of us who have been classified as *Homo Sapiens*—are, according to Emerson, “only half human,” a phrase he uses in the essay, “History.”³² This is not to say that he is denying anyone of their full humanity in any sense. On the contrary, he is reminding us that humanity requires animality in the fullest sense of its spiritual and natural being and oneness. For Emerson, just as humanity is comprised of the immortal nonhuman soul, humanity is also comprised of the mortal nonhuman animal. Emerson sees us so thickly layered within the nonhuman that, to put it negatively, we never can be wholly human without risking alienation: to be “whole” in this sense would be a lack of humanity, not an increase. Or, to put it positively, to be human is to be partly nonhuman, to commune fully in the oneness of the *other me*.

However, Emerson was not a willy-nilly posthumanist. For him, just as the nonhuman is in all, the human is in all, too. “The Supreme Being [or Over-soul] does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us,” claims Emerson.³³ As the Soul beams through human consciousness, an imprint is etched onto all that is nonhuman in the world so that everything, in turn, contains a part of the human. “Nature,” he writes, “is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular.”³⁴ The self is diffused into the world, into all *other mes*; there are others in the world, but we are so much a part of them, that the self is revealed and identified in everyone and everything. To the *other me*, I, too, am an *other me*. This is what Emerson called the “all in each”: the whole of nature is revealed in each particular form in nature.

An Emersonian concept of identity—identity as transcendental oneness—calls us to recognize the relational wholeness and identification we possess with all living beings. According to Emerson, we are intimately bound to,

and constituted by, the nonhuman other—so much so that it is reductive to construct boundaries that ignore the qualities of our being that connect us with nature, our most primary connection. By embracing the nonhuman *other me*, this relational account of identity compels us to think more radically about relations in general, including the sense of relationality that is often taken for granted in accounts of education.

THE ONENESS OF EDUCATIONAL RELATIONS

What does Emerson's profoundly relational account of identity, in which the other is always the *other me*, entail for the claim that relation is the *sine qua non* of education? We will try to address this question as best we can in the words that remain, but the only true response to this question will have to be tested against the intelligence of our reader's innermost heart.

According to Richardson, “[Emerson] says approvingly that, ‘all our education aims to sink what is individual or personal in us.’ ‘Nothing but God is self-dependent.’”³⁵ This Emersonian idea of education not only provides a sharp revisionist account of the more individualistic interpretations of his ideas, it also follows directly and consistently from his relational account of identity we have outlined in this paper. In his account of identity we find a perhaps more radical sense of the oneness of relations that, we believe, is a necessary and perhaps even sufficient condition for the possibility of education. Emerson's distinctly transcendental notion of relation, undifferentiated from his sense of identity, not only responds to Biesta's 2011 call to make room for transcendence in the field of philosophy of education, it also reveals a deeper and perhaps more beautiful risk embedded in taking the claim “no education without relation” seriously and totally. Beyond philosophy of education proper, we believe that this Emersonian idea also responds to calls from ecological and posthumanist theorists of education. Unlike the more recent conventions, however, Emerson's sense of the *other me* opposes an overidentification with his amplified transcendental notion of identity. He is not simply trying to substitute what is human for natural entities.

Within the more practical domain of teaching, the fundamental educational relation between teacher and student is also modulated by Emerson's sense of identity. When the teacher encounters the student, the student cannot be a *not me* divided from a fundamental twofold encounter. Instead, the oneness of educational relations, on an Emersonian account, demands the teacher move beyond the dialectical encounter (*en contra*) and reimagine the student as an *other me*. This may seem far fetched in its most radical transcendentalist accounts, but it is not necessarily so. How many times could a teacher feel their student as a mutual and always-already relational identity and address them as an *other me*? The same relational oneness applies to the student, and not only in relation to the human teacher, but also to the teachers who arrive in the practice of study, through books, through memory, and through nature. When all things cease to be NOT ME and are recast into an *other me*, the educational relation enters the vast flux of a world that is neither entirely external nor totally internal. The transcendental identity we find in Emerson provides philosophy of education with an idea of the oneness of educational relations that merits an examination of the present common sense of what is meant by a "relation" in education.

Just as Emerson was inspired by Platonism and Hinduism, so too we might find inspiration in the past that reminds us independently—yet as a single symphony of truth—of the myriad analogies to the Emersonian doctrine in historical memory and spirit. We can find this spirit in Indigenous teachings and religious traditions along with more recent popular movements in contemporary ontology and science. Wherever we may find them, wherever they may be, we remember and uncover a sense of identity that begins with relational wholes and never allows the part to divide and conquer it. From this sense of identity that unties but never divides we may feel lost in the vast sea of being. So be it. We can also rest assured that no education can exempt itself from this restlessly transcendental relation—a relation that is neither human nor nonhuman and yet both spiritual and material—if we are ultimately willing to grant to Emerson himself the status as an *other me*, if we are willing to peer into his transcendental doctrine as something that is already near and close and, per-

haps, at work in our souls. This work, we believe, is an excessive part of what it means and is for education to be fundamentally relational.

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 56.

2 As quoted in Robert Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 334.

3 Gert Biesta, “No Education Without Hesitation: Exploring the Limits of Educational Relations,” in *Philosophy of Education 2012*, ed. Claudia Ruitenberg (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2013), 1.

4 Gert Biesta, “Transcendence, Revelation, and the Constructivist Classroom: Or, In Praise of Teaching,” in *Philosophy of Education 2011*, ed. Robert Kunzman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2012), 358.

5 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 10.

6 Ibid.

7 We realize that the term “other” has many different philosophical expressions and applications to education. Most famously, perhaps, we acknowledge the place of Emanuel Levinas’ “wholly Other,” Hannah Arendt’s discussion of *alteritas* and otherness, along with Edward’s Said treatment of the term in relation to “orientalism” and the many postcolonial usages of the term. For the purposes of this essay, we will only attempt to discuss the term in its Emersonian sense.

8 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 10.

9 Ibid., 12.

10 Richardson, *Emerson*, 334.

11 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Method of Nature,” in *Essays and Poems* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 120. It is worth mentioning that Emerson actually speaks this way throughout his works; one cannot make too much of a strict periodization since his thought often left and returned to many themes and claims.

12 Richardson, *Emerson*, 334.

13 Ibid., 258.

14 Ibid., 257.

15 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 56 (italics original).

16 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 383.

17 Ibid., 171 (italics original).

18 Ibid., 150.

19 Ibid., 187.

20 Eastern spiritual philosophy was influential in Emerson’s conception of identity and his ontology of holism. While “the West delighted in boundaries,” claims Emerson, Asia is the “country of unity” (*Essays and Poems*, 302). Hindu teachings particularly helped Emerson see that unity underlies everything that appears divided and different, and that eternal, immortal spirit is the source of all things that give the impression of diversity in the world. In “Illusions,” he writes that Hindu “sacred

writings, express the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity, and of that illusion which they [Hindus] conceive variety to be” (*Essays and Poems*, 413). Elsewhere, Emerson extensively quotes passages from Hindu texts, such as, “to apprehend that you are not distinct from me. That which I am, thou art, and that also is this world” (as quoted by Emerson in *Essays and Poems*, 301).

21 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 300.

22 Ibid., 307.

23 Ibid., 204.

24 Ibid., 225.

25 Ibid., 219.

26 Ibid., 411.

27 Emerson, *Essays*, 118.

28 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 205.

29 Ibid., 12.

30 Richardson, *Emerson*, 141-142.

31 Emerson, *Essays*, 252.

32 Ibid.

33 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 42.

34 Ibid.

35 Richardson, *Emerson*, 334.