“THE GREAT EARTH SPEAKING”:
RICHARD JEFFERIES AND THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

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“… the true meaning of utopia: it is a precipitate of collective dreams.”1

The presence in nineteenth-century writing of countervailing impulses between community and isolation, with the attendant utopian possibilities, reaches back to Romanticism but was notably marked in the American Transcendentalist movement, and its English transmutation in the work of the English nature-writer, Richard Jefferies (1848-1887). Jefferies once declared: “I am nothing unless I am a metaphysician.”2 Whilst this is in some senses true, his central theme, transliterated by way of English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, is undoubtedly the influence of natural objects upon the human mind. The entire body of Jefferies’ work is concerned with men and women in a natural setting, and his treatment of the theme ranged from agricultural journalism to pantheistic mysticism cast in prophetic terms. Despite attaining a degree of popularity and esteem with the reading public, Jefferies remained a solitary individual “Who loves Nature can make no friends, everyone repulses, all seem different”, as he observed in his diaries.3 Jefferies therefore seems in a way to stand apart from other contemporary observers of the rural scene such as Thomas Hardy, but his work does offer some deep affinities with Transcendentalism, a movement whose idealism,

3 Ibid., 217.
and utopian philosophy led to a view of the universe as a type of cosmic psyche.

In rebelling against Locke’s epistemology, and in their neo-Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding, the American Transcendentalists veer towards pantheism and a belief in what they term “Universal Spirit”. Philosophically speaking, Emerson argues, “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul”. Thus, “all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME”, is to be “ranked under this name, NATURE”. The key document in this structure of feeling is Emerson’s 1836 essay on “Nature”, which proposes that the universe is composed of nature and soul, and memorably alerts the reader to the mystical connotations of this distinction:

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.

According to the doctrine propounded here, “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact”. Transcendentalism perceives as its central principle the unity in which each individual’s identity is contained within the all. F.O. Matthiessen has pertinently noted Emerson’s “delicate pleasure in his senses, and his even greater pleasure in soaring beyond them”. The core of Emerson’s thought lies in its complex projection of isolation and community, and it has been well said that Transcendental models of individuation “cannot be completely reconciled with theories of social relationship; for the demands of self-reliance, especially the intuition of the ‘divine’ depths of the self, often pull one out of the social orbit into an intense introspection”.

For Emerson, or for Thoreau at Walden Pond, Transcendentalism desiderated a solitary existence in contradistinction to those more

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5 Ibid., 15-16.
6 Ibid., 32.