

“Emerson, Buddhism, and Modernist Poetics”
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There is a distinguished tradition of scholarship about Emerson’s affinity with Buddhism, but relatively little has been said about how this has fostered intertextuality in the emergence of modernist poetics. In what follows, I will revisit this topic, showing that Emerson figures prominently in the development of works by T. S. Eliot and St.-John Perse, whose shared attraction to Buddhism inspired intertextual engagements with Emerson and, through Emerson, with each other.

Emerson’s first encounters with Asian cultures happened during his youth. His namesake uncle, Ralph Haskins, was active in trade with East Asia, and returned from a voyage to China shortly after Emerson was born (Haskins 8-9). Kenneth Cameron describes how Emerson’s father, the Reverend William Emerson, was the founding editor of the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, which in a July 1805 issue featured “possibly the first Sanskrit translation in the United States” (14). Emerson was a student at Harvard College during a time when there was a great deal of interest in Indic traditions, and much of what he read about Hinduism in periodicals as an undergraduate provided a rich stimulus for his future studies in Buddhism (K. Cameron 18-20, 26, 24). As Robert Richardson puts it, “Despite the scarcity of major texts and sympathetic accounts in languages he could read, Emerson came quickly to value the importance and appeal of Buddhism.” (393)

Although Emerson’s first explicit mention of Buddhism occurs in an 1841 letter to Margaret Fuller, he first learned about East Asian Buddhism as early as 1831. In a letter written on 24 May 1831 to his brother William, Emerson says that he has been reading the first seven or eight lectures in the first volume of Victor Cousin’s *Cours de*

l'histoire de la philosophie, which was published in Paris in 1829 (L 1:322). Emerson's reading of Cousin came at a moment of transition and crisis, a time when he was raising fundamental questions about his faith and vocation, culminating in his resignation from the pulpit at the Second Church of Boston on September 9th, 1832 (Buell 21; Richardson 139; Urbas 77-85). He left for Italy in December, arriving in Paris in mid-June, 1833, where he visited the Louvre and the Jardin des Plantes, and attended lectures at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France.

In *Cours de l'histoire*, Cousin calls attention to the importance of Buddhism in the history of philosophy; elaborates the historical and doctrinal connections between Hinduism and Buddhism; and, perhaps most significantly, refers to new work by Eugene Burnouf that was published in the March 1825 issue of the *Journal asiatique* by the Société Asiatique de Paris (178n.1). In 1826, Burnouf published *Essay sur le pali*, the first grammar for one of the sacred languages of Buddhism, giving access to the language of the oldest Buddhist canon. In 1832, just a year before Emerson's visit, Burnouf was elected to the Collège de France, inaugurating the study of Buddhism in Europe. One of the first major texts of Buddhism Burnouf chose to translate was the *Lotus Sutra*, or the *Lotus of the Good Law* and, in 1844, Burnouf published *Introduction à l'histoire de Buddhisme Indien*, which set the course for the academic study of Buddhism for the next century.

Thus we know that Emerson happened to be in Paris when European Buddhist studies was first emerging in the early 1830s and, as Raymond Schwab has shown, the city was the hub of oriental scholarship (111, 46). Ralph Rusk reports that among the Emerson papers there is a copy of the outline of lectures at the Sorbonne for the second

semester, 1833, which lists courses by professors such as Cousin, and a copy of a program from the Collège de France that lists Burnouf “on the Sanskrit language and literature” (*L* 3:220-21n.15). Emerson became increasingly interested in Buddhism during the 1830s and 1840s, unlike the vast majority of Americans, who knew very little about Buddhism until the 1860s and 1870s, when Buddhism became a vogue (Jackson 56, 141). We know that he read and reread a translation of an Indian book on Buddha, because it appeared on the lists noted in his journals for 1836, 1838, and 1840—an experience which, according to Frederic Carpenter, “clearly affected Emerson’s writing” (108). We also can be sure that Emerson was aware of Burnouf’s 1839 translation from Sanskrit into French of manuscripts of the *Lotus Sutra*, because selections from Burnouf’s translation were included in two articles in *La Revue Indépendante* in 1843—“Fragments des Prédications de Buddha” and “Considérations sur l’Origine du Bouddhisme”—and in his journal that year, Emerson had translated a passage from the latter of these articles into English. Emerson was editor for *The Dial* at that time, and included a selection from Burnouf’s French translation that was subsequently translated into English, either by Elizabeth Palmer Peabody or by Emerson himself, for publication as “The Preaching of Buddha” in the January 1844 issue (Van Anglen 3-5). This publication of a selection from the *Lotus Sutra* in *The Dial*, which was prefixed with an extract from Burnouf’s article, effectively opened what Thomas Tweed has called the American conversation about Buddhism (xix).

Ronald Bosco, Joel Myerson, and Daisaku Ikeda have observed how Emerson’s doctrine of correspondence resonates with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, which teaches that all things arise in dependence on other things (100-02).

Indeed, the intellectual quality underlying the Buddhist perspective may have been an enabling source of its appeal for Emerson at this time. Emerson's experience in the Jardin des Plantes, related in his journal for 1833, instructs us not just to take Emerson's interests in science more seriously, but to consider how his awareness of Buddhism prepared him for his naturalist revelation (*JMN* 4:199-200).

There are many other suggestive references to Buddhism in Emerson's journals, but the clearest evidence we have that Emerson himself regarded Buddhism as relevant to his thought occurs in "The Transcendentalist," an 1842 lecture read at the Masonic Temple in Boston. Here, in his first public reference to Buddhism, Emerson explicitly identifies Buddhism with Transcendentalism. "The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine," he writes. "Buddhism is an expression of it. The Buddhist...in his conviction that every good deed can by no possibility escape its reward, is a Transcendentalist." (*CW* 1:168) In this lecture, as in his essay "Compensation," which appeared a year earlier, Emerson conceives of a universe where beneficial effects are derived from virtuous actions and harmful effects from evil actions, a theory that, according to Arthur Versluis and others, was shaped by the doctrine of karma shared by Buddhism and Hinduism (58; Christy 98-105; Jackson 54). There is, moreover, a growing consensus among scholars with regard to resonances with the Buddhist doctrine of selflessness or the nonego in one of the most memorable passages from Emerson's *Nature* where he becomes a transparent eye-ball (*CW* 1:37; Hakutani 45-47; Richardson 393; Rudy 50). Sharon Cameron has argued that in Emerson "the personal is most marked at the moment of its obliteration," and this recurring dialectic, Emerson's "making and *un*making of personality," should be regarded in light of his interest in

Buddhism (viii, 93-94). Indeed, Emerson's perceived affinities with Buddhism may have been one reason, as Alan Hodder has remarked, that his writings influenced Japanese intellectual circles during the Meiji era, when "Compensation" was the very first of his essays to be translated into Japanese by Nakamura Masano in 1888 (401). D. T. Suzuki, an influential interpreter of Zen Buddhism, published his "Essay on Emerson" in 1896, and in later years recalled the "deep impressions" made upon him while he was reading Emerson in college (343-44; Goto 74).

Did Emerson's engagement with Buddhism help to shape his legacy? If so, how? T. S. Eliot's academic course of study raised the strong possibility that Eliot was intensely aware of Emerson's prior interest in Buddhism. In his graduate courses, for example, where Eliot read works by the Sanskrit scholar and philologist, F. Max Müller, he would have learned that Müller dedicated his foundational study of comparative religion, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, to Emerson. Moreover, while auditing lectures in another course, Philosophy 24a, "Schools of Religious and Philosophical Thought in Japan," taught by the Japanese comparative religion scholar Masaharu Anesaki, during the 1913-1914 academic year, Eliot received a class handout on the "parable of the plants" from the *Lotus Sutra* that was the same excerpt published by Emerson in *The Dial* (Crawford 176). Anesaki, who frequently drew comparisons between Unitarianism and Buddhism, and who was closely connected with the Unitarian community in Boston as well as the Unitarian mission in Japan, would have known, and likely mentioned this to his class (Kearns 78).

Many critics have examined Eliot's allusion to Hinayana Buddhism in "The Fire Sermon," but no one to my knowledge has discussed the relevance of Emerson's

Mahayana Buddhist selection for *The Dial*, even though its imagery and hermeneutical emphasis present strong, striking resonances with *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land*, as in the parable of the plants, thunder and water figure the difficulty, and necessity, of cultural mediation and interpretation in the transmission of Mahayana Buddhist teachings. In “What the Thunder Said,” part five of *The Waste Land*, collocated cultural perspectives drawn from Hinduism and Judeo-Christianity gain in force and significance when we consider that Eliot would also have known this Buddhist parable of the plants published by Emerson. The version rendered in *The Dial* describes a scene in which a great cloud, resounding with the noise of thunder, spreads “homogenous water” over the land and nourishes the different kinds of plants, “every one according to its force and its object.” The rain, we are told, represents the teachings of the Buddha, and the plants represent the diverse capacities of living beings who hear and are nourished by his teachings, each one according to its ability and need. The parable demonstrates how the Buddha employs skillful means and devices in order to adapt his teachings to the abilities of his hearers, a central doctrine of the Mahayana (“Preaching” 398-399). Eliot’s deliberate allusion to this East Asian Buddhist parable conjoins the quandary of interpretation vividly dramatized at the end of *The Waste Land* by the Hindu parable of the Thunder, with the Biblical trope of water as a metaphor of transmission in what Eliot called the “water-dripping song,” endowing greater formal coherence to his poem as a whole. Both the water-dripping song and the parable of the plants offer intimations of new life and hope, comprising a vital, specifically American contribution to *The Waste Land*.

There is obviously much more to be said about Buddhist influences in Emerson and the importance of East-West interculturality for the development of modernist poetics. For example, it is relatively well known that Eliot translated St.-John Perse's *Anabase*, but little has been said about their shared interest in Emerson's writings. In 1908, Perse began reading Emerson's *Sept essais* in the third edition (1907), with a preface by Maurice Maeterlinck at a formative time when, as the scholar Renée Ventresque has argued, he was searching intellectually, and his reading of Emerson nurtured his intellectual and moral development (*Saint-John Perse* 27-28); and he also owned and read, with conviction, a 1909 French translation of *Conduct of Life* ("EMERSON" 334). Like Emerson, Perse had a longstanding interest in East-West interculturality, and his childhood encounter with Hindu ritual laid a foundation for his subsequent interest in Buddhism (Ostrovsky 27-28). During his studies at the University in Bordeaux, Perse acquired his interest in "l'indianisme," studied Sanskrit, and could have discovered works by Eugène Burnouf and Max Müller in the library there. Perse owned a copy of H. Oldenberg's *Bouddha, sa vie, sa doctrine, sa communauté*, and his attraction to Emerson would undoubtedly been enhanced by their shared interest in Buddhism (Ventresque, *Saint-John Perse* 105, 109-110). Ventresque informs us that Perse revisited Emerson's writings when he was composing *Vents* at Seven Hundred Acre Island in Maine, and that the spiritual geography of the poem owes much to his renewed encounter with Emerson ("*Vents et les muses*" 81; *Saint-John Perse* 23). I would add that Perse's reference to a Banyon tree in *Pluies*, another poem written during his American exile, deliberately alludes to Emerson's use of the same symbol in "Compensation" and the doctrine of karma shared by Buddhism and Hinduism. In

Emerson, the “banian” tree appears in the last line of “Compensation,” and symbolizes how even tragedy results in a compensatory resilience, creativity, and deep insight (*CW* 2:73). The intensity and scope of Emerson’s influence on Perse is evident in the opening lines of *Pluies*, where Perse presents “LE BANYAN de la pluie,” a banyon of falling rain, that “takes hold” of the City. Here, as in the parable of the plants and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the cleansing rain offers sustenance, “ce lait d’eau vive,” allowing fresh poetic speech and new ideas to flourish (Perse 174, 175, 193). Like Emerson, Perse was drawn to the banyon as a symbol of the New World artist’s cultivation of individuality and East-West interculturality in order to plant and nurture an emerging tradition.

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