

[연구논문]

# Irrational Rationalism in the Occult “Transparent Eyeball” : A Study on an Occult Idea in the Nineteenth Century America

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## 1. Introduction

Although it presents a reading of Emerson's *Nature*, the argument of this paper goes beyond the subject of *Nature* itself.<sup>1)</sup> It employs Emerson's *Nature* to raise a broader issue: a historical relationship between early modern irrational occult ideas and modern rational political ideas and the complex ways these two disparate elements are connected to *unconscious* desire for totalitarian power. In other words, this paper is an attempt to reframe *one* aspect of modern

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1) For subsequent quotations from *Nature*, I use Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman (New York: Signet, 1965), 186–222. It should be noted that this paper does not discuss Emerson's thoughts as a whole. *Nature*, Emerson's first book, contains a relatively stronger idealism than his later works. David M. Robinson, "Emerson and Religion," *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 170–174.

rationality and its potential implication within the context of 'ancient irrationality,' or more specifically, within the context of Western occultism.

The nineteenth century experienced a paradox in which rationalism and irrationalism coincided in a complex way. Although it was still the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, which was inaugurated in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century also bore witness to "the occult underground" or "the occult revival,"<sup>2)</sup> a movement which has been largely ignored by historians, who, "because of its intellectual unrespectability," "often relegated [it] to a dusty bin in the back room marked superstition."<sup>3)</sup> As James Webb explains, "Just when the age of Reason seemed to be bearing fruit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an unexpected reaction against [rationalism], a wild return to archaic forms of belief, and among the intelligentsia a sinister concentration on superstitions which had been thought buried."<sup>4)</sup>

Being a historical product of the nineteenth century, Emerson's *Nature* is a textual place where we can observe this peculiar historical phenomenon: a strange 'amalgamation' of triumphant rationalism and the revival of irrationalism. I say 'amalgamation,' rather than just 'coexistence,' because in Emerson's *Nature* rationalism and irrationalism occurred not

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2) James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (Chicago: Open Court, 1974).

3) It was in 1974 when James Webb said that "the occult revival of the 19th century" had been ignored by scholars. In 2001, Arthur Versluis also said that "esotericism has been frequently excluded from the purview of academia as whole for the past several centuries," and claimed his research on the occult in the 19th century "is among the very first venture into this new territory." Webb, *Occult Underground*, 1-2. As late as 2008, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke observed that "[t]he scholarly study of Western esotericism is a comparatively recent phenomenon." Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

4) Webb, *Occult Underground*, 7-8.

merely synchronously, but more importantly in a paradoxically *unified* form. This paper shall address this aspect of these contradictory elements' 'amalgamation.'

This peculiar amalgamation, the irrational rationalism in *Nature*, raises another significant issue. F. O. Matthiessen, in his foundational study, *American Renaissance*, observed that "it is no long step from his [Emerson's] indiscriminate glorification of power to the predatory career of Henry Ford," and hereby "[he] noted the connection between Emerson's "ideal man of self-reliant energy" and "the brutal man of Fascism."<sup>5)</sup> Yet, conspicuously enough, Matthiessen's intuitive observation of the totalitarian implication in Emersonian idealism has not drawn the attention of later scholars. This paper shall deal with this largely ignored political implication of *Nature* as well.

The "transparent eyeball," which lies at the core of *Nature's* idealism, expresses not just peaceful transcendence,<sup>6)</sup> *but also* modernity's insatiable desire for rationality,<sup>7)</sup> which unconsciously strives to realize itself as Foucauldian power.<sup>8)</sup> As S. Ijsseling observes, "According to Foucault, totalitarianism culminated in a modern

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5) F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 367-368; Michael Lopez, *Emerson and Power: Creative Antagonism in the Nineteenth Century* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 47. Here, Lopez's refutation of Mattheissen is not very convincing.

6) For this kind of transcendentalist reading of Emerson, which is also a traditional one, see Michael Lopez, *Emerson and Power*, 19-52.

7) This paper differs from de-transcendentalist readings, which tend to exalt Emerson as a prophet of postmodernity smoothing down the anxiety of modernity. For de-transcendentalist or deconstructive readings as a modern trend in Emerson scholarship since the 1980s, see Lopez, *Emerson and Power*, 165-189.

8) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 195-228.

state that is characterized by a very complex combination of techniques of individualisation and a system of totalisation.”<sup>9)</sup> Yet, there is a point to be made here. Foucault says that he has “never argued that a power mechanism *suffices* to characterize a society.”<sup>10)</sup> Likewise, the totalitarian mechanism implied in *Nature* does not *suffice* to characterize *Nature*. This paper discusses not the whole, but *an* aspect of *Nature*, which is yet still crucial.

In short, this paper shall discuss the nature of the “transparent eyeball” in relation to the occult revival of the nineteenth century, and thereby it shall explain *one* aspect of modern rationality and its totalitarian implication.<sup>11)</sup>

## 2. “Universal Antagonism” in the “Transparent Eyeball”

It seems natural to read Emerson’s *Nature* within the framework of idealism, which portrays human beings in perfect harmony with Nature; there seems to be no contradiction or conflicts between Nature and man in Emersonian cosmos.<sup>12)</sup> A critical reading of *Nature*, however, reveals the elements that are difficult to explain within the framework of simple idealism. Underneath the apparent

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9) S. Ijsseling, “Foucault With Heidegger,” *Man and World* vol.19 (1986): 422.

10) Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, tr. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 2000), 293.

11) For a detailed examination of the relationship between European occult ideas and modern politics, see B. J. Gibbons, *Spirituality and the Occult: From the Renaissance To the Modern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 123–124; Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 339–367. For occultism’s influence on totalitarianism, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence On Nazi Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

12) For the tradition of reading Emerson as an idealist, see Lopez, *Emerson and Power*, 19–52.

optimism and harmony, man in fact bears contradictory feelings towards Nature.

The kingdom of man *over* nature, which cometh not with observation, -- a *dominion* such as now is beyond dream of God, -- he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.<sup>13)</sup>

For Emerson, union with Nature is not merely a serene and peaceful event while it takes the form of "domination," implying aggressiveness and coercion. *Beneath* the "kinship" between man and Nature is intimated "universal antagonism, not cosmic unity".<sup>14)</sup>

The famous "transparent eye-ball" thus serves as the cathexis of this "universal antagonism" between man and Nature.

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 eye-ball*. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.<sup>15)</sup>

Although 'idealist' Emerson might have intended the event of becoming "a transparent eye-ball" to mean a peaceful union of man with Nature, as "a transparent eye-ball," he ironically divulges his unconscious desire to dominate Nature. Here originates the "universal antagonism."

It is crucial to understand the significance of the "transparent

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13) Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 8, 223, italics mine

14) Lopez, *Emerson and Power*, 10.

15) Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 1, 189, italics mine.

eye-ball.” In *Nature* there are numerous “see”s and “eye”s, and also repeated emphases on the relationship between seeing, knowledge, and power. For Emerson, seeing is another word for knowing, and true knowledge is acquired only through seeing. This theme permeates throughout *Nature*, and is especially prominent in the fourth chapter, titled “language.”

A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of 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*.

A new interest surprises us, whilst, under the view now suggested, we contemplate the fearful extent and multitude of objects: since “*every object rightly seen, unlocks a new faculty of the soul*.” That which was unconscious *truth*, becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of *knowledge*, -- *a new weapon in the magazine of power*.<sup>16)</sup>

In the passage, “the eyes to understand [Nature’s] text” shows the crucial link between seeing and knowing. Through “eyes” we “understand” “text.” Through “eyes” we find the whole world turned into “a book.” We “see” in the world “every form significant of its hidden life and final cause,” that is, ‘deep’ knowledge. We find also an important linkage between knowledge and power. ‘Seeing’ as the only true method of acquiring ‘true’ knowledge “unlocks a new faculty” of the soul, that is, *power*. “That which was *unconscious truth*, becomes... a part of the domain of *knowledge*, -- *a new weapon in the magazine of power*.” “Unconscious truth” expounded by ‘spiritual’ *vision* becomes

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16) Ibid., Chapter 4, 202, italics mine.

*knowledge*, which immediately turns into "a new weapon in the magazine of power." In the Emersonian universe, the most important equation or the most fundamental 'spiritual' law is established: 'vision = knowledge = power.'

### 3. Emersonian Power as Secular Political Idea

#### a) Transparent Eye and Foucauldian Power

The question is: What kind of power is this? What are the qualities of this power which implies "universal antagonism" beneath the serene and peaceful "transparent eye-ball"?

Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (*leaving me my eyes*), which nature cannot repair. 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 eye-ball*; I am *nothing*; I see *all*; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.<sup>17)</sup>

The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with *observation*, -- a dominion such as now is beyond dream of God, -- he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to *perfect sight*.<sup>18)</sup>

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17) *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, 189, italics mine.

18) *Ibid.*, Chapter 8, 223, italics mine.

To identify the most fundamental quality, the following question should be first addressed: is the event of becoming “a transparent eye-ball” an experience of an individual? Apparently it is. But this appearance is quite dubious. Human individuality or the sense of individuality consists of various personal experiences, many of which come from social ties such as family, friends, school, and various other social groups. When one becomes “a transparent eyeball” and therefore “when all mean egotism vanishes,” it is actually not “mean egotism” that vanishes, but subjectivity and individuality. For “I am *nothing*” then, “[T]ransparent eyeball,” therefore, can and *should* be read not as a personality but as an abstract idea or conceptuality of power itself, though this may not be what Emerson intended *consciously*.

The second most important quality of Emersonian power is its invisibility. When it comes to the visual organ, Emerson favors transparency over opaqueness, invisibility over visibility. ‘A transparent/invisible eyeball’ is of a higher value than ‘an opaque/visible eyeball.’ If you want to acquire the supreme power, you should see with your transparent eyes, which are, therefore, invisible to the eyes of others. If your eyes are opaque, therefore visible, you cannot acquire such power and you will remain powerless. And if your eyes are visible, then you do not “see all.” Only when your eyes are transparent, or more strictly, when your whole being, by becoming a transparent eyeball, becomes invisible, you “see all.” Absolute “dominion” over the universe comes not with “observation”—that is, through visible eyes, but only through “perfect sight,” that is, through “a transparent eyeball,” the invisible eyes.

To “see all” means two things: first, it means you see everything that is everywhere. In other words, it means omnipresence. Second, it means you possess perfect knowledge of things. You see through

appearance and grasp essence behind appearance.

It is through its invisibility of surveillance and the total knowledge of objects through ceaseless surveillance that Panoptic power (as Foucault describes it) comes to have invincibility, pervasiveness and omnipresence. This form of Foucauldian power is the latest and the most developed one in human history, and, for Foucault, this panoptic power seems invincible because it is invisible, pervasive, and omnipresent, which means it is impossible to resist, attack or struggle against.

At least in this point, the Emersonian power expressed in a condensed way in the "transparent eyeball" is similar to Foucauldian panoptic power. The "transparent eyeball," like Foucauldian panoptic power, is invincible and irresistible through its invisibility and omniscience. Nothing bad can happen to "a transparent eyeball," since it is absolute power. "There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (*leaving me my eyes,*) which nature cannot repair."

#### **b) Transparent Objects and Foucauldian Discipline**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault observes fundamental changes in the way of discipline and punishment in the course of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Through this 'humanization' process, the object of discipline and punishment changed from the body to the 'soul.' The accumulation through panoptic surveillance of knowledge about prisoners' behaviors means that power is now concerned with human mentality or 'soul,' not with their superficial body. Besides its own invisibility, Foucauldian power's 'irresistibility' comes from its way of processing and accumulating knowledge: it finds out *invisible* unity, pattern, and law within individual and apparently chaotic

phenomena. It “see[s] through them” to “causes and spirits,” just like Emerson’s “transparent eyeball”; and before its penetrating vision of surveillance, “distinctness of objects” become “abated” and “outlines and surfaces become *transparent*.”<sup>19)</sup>

Once again at least in this sense, the Emersonian eye of reason can be said to have the nature of Foucauldian panoptic power. When the power tries to control the body through corporeal violence, it confronts resistance since violence can be detected by the oppressed. However, when the power controls the invisible part of its objects, the subject of such power cannot resist since violence or oppression is difficult to detect. And only then the power can be stable and permanent.

For Foucault, the accumulation of knowledge on *common patterns and laws* of soul aims at “normalization” of the objects under surveillance. And this “normalization” is most effective when the norm is internalized by surveyed objects so that the system of self-discipline is operative. Although a ‘strict’ analogy is difficult to establish on this point between Foucauldian and Emersonian power, it is not impossible, either. One of the most important rhetorical strategies Emerson adopts is that of mystical religious writings, which can be termed repetition of spiral progress.<sup>20)</sup> The mystical style, which possesses a religious or irrational element, contributes to the internalization of the Emersonian demand for “normalization.” Here we witness the paradoxical event

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19) *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, 209, italics mine.

20) For example, religious writings by mystical writers such as Thomas a Kempis, Brother Lawrence, Jeanne Guyon, Francois Fenelon, William Law, Hannah Whitall Smith, Andrew Murray, etc. use a similar rhetoric of repetition. Epistolary writings and writings on the mystical experience of progress share this rhetoric. Theological treatises such as Augustine’s Confession, however, do not draw on the same method.

that an irrational religious element expedites a rational secular history, which we shall discuss further in the next section.

#### **4. Emersonian Power as Occult Religious Idea: Hermetic Rather Than Christian**

Power is required to ensure society's survival by controlling both external nature and the internal nature of society.<sup>21)</sup> External nature is controlled by productive knowledge, which is a technological power, and internal nature, by societal or cultural power. Without controlling both physical and human natures, survival of society is hardly guaranteed. The nineteenth century saw "the final collapse" of the dominant cultural power of the Church, which had controlled the internal nature of society until then.<sup>22)</sup> The industrial revolution and the subsequent advancement of science seriously challenged the established religious power, which had still been both the societal and cultural power. Furthermore, successive major revolutions such as the French Revolution of 1789, the socialist movement inflamed by Karl Marx and Engels, and the biological evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin brought Christian faith to a near destruction. James Webb wrote:

What was happening was the final collapse of the old world-order [that is, the Establishment culture of Western Europe, based entirely upon Christianity] which had first been rudely assaulted during the Renaissance and Reformation. . . just when the Age of Reason seemed to be bearing fruit in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an unexpected reaction against the very method which had brought

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21) Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 53.

22) Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 1–13, 339–67.

success, a wild return to archaic forms of belief, and among the intelligentsia a sinister concentration on *superstitions* which had been thought buried... Reason died sometime before 1865... after the Age of Reason came the Age of the *Irrational*.”<sup>23)</sup>

In 1749, the Swedish theosophist Emanuel Swedenborg published the *Arcana Coelestia* in London. Franz Mesmer propagated Animal Magnetism. There were Shakers, Andrew Jackson Davis's spiritualism and theosophist movement, which continued into H. P. Blavastky, Albanese, Versluis, and Gibbons understood American Transcendentalism and European Romanticism within the tradition of this “Occult” and “Irrational” movement.<sup>24)</sup> People felt anxiety before the collapse of the established collective psychological power of the Church. They had to find an alternative haven for their ‘souls,’ and they found this in occultism.<sup>25)</sup>

Emerson himself was an ardent reader of these occult philosophies. The grotesque eye-ball symbolism was not Emerson's original creation but was borrowed from the German theosophist Jacob Boehme.<sup>26)</sup> Emerson's interest in Hermeticism is important to understand the “transparent eye-ball” as well.<sup>27)</sup> A description of mystic initiation into Hermeticism, which revived and became of great interest to intellectuals of early

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23) Webb, *Occult Underground*, 7–8.

24) See *Ibid.*, 8; Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 260–258, Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 54–63, Gibbons, *Spirituality*, 15, 83.

25) See Albanese, *America*, 253–260; Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 21–52.

26) See Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 139–144.

27) In “Books,” Emerson includes the alchemical and theosophist bible, “Hermes Trismegistus,” among the “Bibles of the world,” thus putting it on an equal status with the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Buddhist classics. See Versluis, *Esoteric Origins*, 145.

modern Europe, reveals striking similarities to Emersonian transcendence or the becoming of "a transparent eye-ball."

The world of the second century was, however, seeking intensively for knowledge of reality, for an answer to its problems which the normal education failed to give. It turned to other ways of *seeking an answer, intuitive, mystical, magical*. *Since reason seemed to have failed, it sought to cultivate the Nous, the intuitive exercise*, but as a way of reaching intuitive knowledge of the divine and of the meaning of the world, as a gnosis . . . [The adept] seems to reach this illumination through *contemplation* of the cosmos as reflected in his own Nous or mens *which separates out for him its divine meaning and gives him a spiritual mastery over it*, as in the familiar Gnostic revelation or experience of *the ascent of the soul through the spheres of the planets to become immersed in the divine*.<sup>28)</sup>

The historical background of ancient Hermeticism is very similar to that of the 'transcendentalism' in *Nature*. "[T]he normal education failed to give" "an answer" in the second century, just as "the retrospective" attitude of the scholarship contemporary with Emerson and 'much' specialized and divided natural science did not provide satisfactory answers on the meaning of the world.<sup>29)</sup> The world without meaning is the world causing anxiety and restlessness among people. Just as the people in that century turned to intuitive knowledge, so Emerson turned to the same kind of knowledge. Just as they get illumination of the meaning of the universe from the contemplation of cosmos, so Emerson teaches that thorough seeing Nature we realize the hidden meaning of the world. Just as the

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28) Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1964), 4, italics mine.

29) See Emerson, *Nature*, "Introduction," 186.

ancient people have “experience of *the ascent of the soul through the spheres of the planet*” as a form of “revelation,” so Emerson is “*uplifted into infinite space*.” Just as they “become immersed in the divine, so for Emerson “*the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.*”

Most importantly, the ultimate goal of Hermetic practice was in the end to achieve “*mastery over [the cosmos]*,” through perceiving “divine meaning”, that is, knowledge.<sup>30)</sup> And the knowledge or “gnosis” is attained through “contemplation”, that is, through a form of ‘seeing’ in Emerson’s sense. Both Gnosticism and Hermeticism are characterized by their emphasis on the experience of transcending the material world and the spiritual vision to see “a gnosis,” a hidden knowledge. Yet, there is a fundamental difference in the purpose of the transcendence and in the nature of the spiritual vision. While complete severance from the material world itself is the goal of Gnostic transcendence, it serves as a means to have complete mastery over the material world for Hermeticism. Moreover, the spiritual vision, which enables Gnostic vision and ‘gnosis’ makes one abhor and flee from the material world; Hermetic vision endows you with divine power to control the material world. Hermeticism, therefore, constitutes an important metaphysical foundation of modern science, while Gnosticism does not.<sup>31)</sup>

Versluis reads the Emersonian “transparent eyeball” as signifying

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30) See also, Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 22ff, 128–129. Here she differentiates pessimistic gnosis from optimistic gnosis, calling the latter specifically Hermeticism. Similarly, I follow traditional understandings of Gnosticism (which is, however, blamed to have been affected by European Orientalism). For the traditional understanding of Gnosticism, see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 20–109.

31) Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.

serenity and peace, by identifying in it a New Testament allusion to spiritual eyes. But spiritual vision in the New Testament is not very interested in mastery over Nature, while Emersonian secularized spiritual vision is obsessed with it. In short, Nature's transcendentalism is more akin to Hermeticism than to Gnosticism or New Testamental spirituality, which builds a strong reason why the "transparent eyeball" in Nature is not merely 'transcendental' but obsessed with power.

The implication of the religious-historical context of the occult "transparent eyeball," considered together with its association with the secular rational political ideas discussed in the previous section is this: the nineteenth century's occult religious ideas and culture greatly contributed to the development of rational secular political ideas. A collective psychological need to have *a sense of belonging* created the religious occult "transparent eye-ball," which, as we have discussed, is at the same time a symbolic expression of a secular rational political idea. The concluding section shall discuss the implication of this paradoxical coincidence of the rational and the irrational in a more detailed way.

## **5. Modernity's Anxiety, Totalitarianism, and the Unconscious of the Text**

As discussed, "a transparent eye-ball" divulges "the universal antagonism" between man and Nature, that is, the anxiety and restlessness *hidden* beneath idealism or transcendentalism. Although Emerson might have intended to portray perfect spiritual serenity and peace, "a transparent eye-ball" unwittingly reveals anxiety and restlessness, as it cannot rest even for a moment from observing an extremely other-ized Nature. And due to this 'inordinate' interest in the mastery of the world, the

spirituality and transparency of the eyeball becomes 'contaminated' with grotesque corporeality; the eye does not have an eyelid, leaving every blood vessel on it laid bare.

Jürgen Habermas observes that the increase of power through the accumulation of knowledge does "not only expand ranges of options but also new problem situations." "A higher stage of [power] ... does bring relief from problems of [the previous stage]. But the problems that arise at the new stage of [advanced power and knowledge] – insofar as they are at all comparable with the old ones—*increase in intensity*."<sup>32)</sup>

Habermas provides an appropriate explanation about the "increase in intensity" caused by "a transparent eye." For Emerson, the (secularized) spiritual 'eye' is the only true organ that can accumulate knowledge, which is a direct source of power. "A transparent eyeball" is *the* symbol of the highest state of total knowledge and power, and this means, according to Habermas, the most increased problems, that is, the most intensified anxiety and restlessness. Emersonian power cannot be incarnated in the form of just an eye, it *should* be represented itself in the form of "an eye-ball," an eye that does not have eyelids and is therefore laid bare. The Emersonian eyeball's intense restlessness and anxiety in fact deprive it of the need for an eyelid, for the Emersonian eyeball is eternally *cursed* not to be able to blink and rest even for a moment, because of its insatiable and relentless desire for Power.

The power that Habermas discusses is the power behind the development of rationality. In this sense, Emersonian power with its

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32) Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 164, italics mine.

demand for transparency is another name for the demand for modern rationality. It requires everything to be 'transparent.' Everything should reveal its invisible 'true' identity lying beneath its visible appearance. Everything should be understood according to rational or scientific standards such as thing's "solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility." And it should not stop there. All this materialistic knowledge should go on to be "transfer[red]" to reveal "the analogy that marries Matter and Mind ."<sup>33)</sup> In other words, everything should reveal its invisible "Mind" hidden behind its visible materiality. The same principle applied to material things also should be applied to abstract things, such as social institutions or cultural practices. It forces each person to shed irrational cloaks of traditional authority, whether that person is a king or a priest (whether white or male). Modernity's demand for "transparency" or rationality revealed that traditional authorities such as the monarchy and the Church are based on ideas that are irrational and unscientific. Modernity's demand for "transparency" or rationality has brought about not only scientific revolution but also liberation of humanity from the irrational pre-modern violence it suffered from the absolute monarchy and the Church.<sup>34)</sup>

When this rationalization or 'transparentization' process goes on to extremes, however, it is in danger of becoming conducive to totalitarian will. Transparency is demanded both for every surveying subject and surveyed object. Everything in the universe should be transparent. Transparency means not only physical invisibility for concrete things,

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33) Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 5, 203.

34) Alan Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*, tr. David Macey. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), 9-90.

but also extreme denial of individuality and diversity for human subjects. Therefore “[t]he name of the nearest friend sounds then *foreign and accidental*. To be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then *a trifle and a disturbance*.”<sup>35)</sup> There is a potential danger in demanding transparency or rationality and that is that personality, individuality and diversity will be *reduced* to a ‘bundle’ of unified laws and principles. And in the end when “[A]ll these lessons” are “transfer[ed]” to Reason, that is, when they are reduced to being absorbed by the “Universal Being,” human personality and subjectivity are completely dissolved revealing themselves as a fantasy or an ideology.<sup>36)</sup>

The process of human identity or human society becoming “transparent” can be called ‘atomization,’ to borrow from Hannah Arendt. Emerson’s demand for transparency rigorously persists until every element of human society including human identity becomes “highly atomized”<sup>37)</sup> And Arendt presents this ‘high atomization’ as an essential condition for the realization of totalitarian society. She says,

Such loyalty [to totalitarian power] can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances drives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party.<sup>38)</sup>

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35) Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 1, 189.

36) Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 5, 203.

37) Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Part Three (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 15.

38) *Ibid.*, 21–22. See the striking similarity to “[t]he name of the nearest friend sounds then *foreign and accidental*. To be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then *a trifle and a disturbance*.”

In other words, the demand for 'transparency,' which once had liberated human subjects from the irrational violence of the king and the church, can possibly threaten to nullify the idea of human subjectivity itself, which is already in progress since Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.<sup>39)</sup> Through destructively rational analysis of the world, the desire for modern rationality or transparency strives to 'liberate' everyone from every sense of identity, the sense of "having a place in the world" that comes from consciousness of "social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances." Human subjectivity before the demand of transparency and rationality turns out to be a grand ideology and a myth. The totalitarian perceptive violence which understands individualities and pluralities as "a trifle and an accident," "foreign and accidental," is one of the possible logical ends of Emerson's desire for transparency and modern rationality.<sup>40)</sup>

Beneath the transcendental "transparent eye-ball" lies anxiety and restlessness. Could this be because the unconscious of the text is well aware of this ironic and gloomy potential result?

## 6. Conclusion

The point that should be understood is that the early modern occultism and modern rationalism coincide in Emerson's "transparent eye-ball", as we have discussed above.<sup>41)</sup> Irrational elements played a

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39) Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*, 104–133.

40) *Ibid.*, 91–133; Emerson, *Nature*, Chapter 1, 189.

41) There are numerous researches on this 'coincidence' in the field of studies on religion and science. For a classical study see E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003); see also Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (Lodon; New York: Routledge, 1972), which deals with the significant influence of occult philosophies on the modern scientific revolution. As for similar cases in

significant role behind the development of modern rationality. They provided psychological motivation and energy to expedite modernity's rational and scientific project. And it also should be noted that the synergy from this paradoxical coexistence implies totalitarian desire *in the unconscious* despite irrationality's sincere aspiration for serene transcendence.

This study might go on even to imply that the potential danger that modernity's desire for rationality can possibly transform to 'irrational' desire for totalitarian 'utopia' might be *partly* due to the paradoxical union of occult religious enthusiasm and rational scientific practice. Totalitarianism implied in the "transparent eyeball[s]" *unconscious* might not be explained properly as the result of modernity's desire for rationality which has gone extreme. For its extremity itself is *partly* due to enthusiasm inherent in occult and religious ideas. In other words, the totalitarian *unconscious* of the "transparent eyeball" might be a logical result of the lack of *complete* epistemological severance between irrational and rational, religious and secular ideals, which is the very nature of Emerson's idealism in *Nature*.

Modern de-transcendentalist or deconstructive readings, unduly influenced by modernist bias, however, fail to appreciate the significance of religious and mystical elements and therefore fail to note the paradoxical coincidence of rationalism and irrationalism. They tend to appreciate one element over the other, depreciating idealism and transcendentalism as insignificant for an understanding of the true Emerson. They instead celebrate Emerson as the precursor of

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colonial America, see Sarah Rivett, "Empirical Desire: Conversion, Ethnography, and the New Science of the Praying Indian," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4:1 16-45.

postmodernism, whose trademark is plurality and individuality<sup>42)</sup>

Yet, now we see that Emerson is neither a de-transcendentalist, who, while pretending to be a transcendentalist, in reality celebrates a fragmented and contradictory material world, nor a transcendentalist, who naively sees a vision of immaculate unity and serene harmony in Nature. Rather, Emerson's transcendentalist aspiration is a sincere one but inevitably implies anxieties and contradictions in spite of his honest attempts to transcend all these 'imperfections.'

Finally, there are several important related issues that remain unaddressed: how later generations have responded to this element of political implication in the "transparent eyeball"; how they have understood or appropriated it according to their own needs; how this totalitarian unconscious in Nature has affected later times? This paper leaves these questions to be answered in a future study.

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42) For the postmodernist elements in Emerson, see George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992); Lopez, *Emerson and Power*, 165–189.

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**Abstract**

**Irrational Rationalism in the Occult  
“Transparent Eyeball”:  
A Study on an Occult Idea in the  
Nineteenth Century America**

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Modern readings of Emerson since the 1980s have presented Emerson as a de-transcendentalist, a prophet of postmodernism, whose trademark is the celebration of the plurality and diversity of the secularized world. These readings are unjustly influenced by modernist bias, because they do not sufficiently consider the context of occult, irrational elements in Emerson, and unduly emphasize secularized and materialist sides of Emerson instead.

This paper suggests a reading for Emerson's *Nature* within the context of those elements overlooked by modern Emerson scholarship, that is, elements of occult religious irrationality. With these elements foregrounded, the “transparent eye-ball” is interpreted not merely as an expression of peaceful spiritual experience but also a signal of modernity's desire for “transparency” or “rationality.” As revealed in the metaphor of the “Transparent eyeball, such a desire contributes to modernity's anxiety. This paper demonstrates how modernity's demand for rationality and the ancient occult desire for transcendence coincide in the concept of Emersonian power as expressed by the “transparent eye-ball.” And finally, it discusses how a totalitarian *unconscious* operates beneath Emerson's sincere celebration of the “transparency” of idealism.

**Key Words**

Occultism, Foucauldian Panoptic Power, Modernity's Anxiety, Totalitarianism, Unconscious, Modern Rationality, "Transparent Eye-ball"