Article

Sites of Solitude: Situating the Wilderness of Nature in Wei-Jin Dark Learning and Emerson

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Abstract: For Daoism, the wilderness of nature beyond human society has often been viewed as a site for eremitic retreat in spiritual solitude, a realm where an individual can transcend the limits of social existence. While this tradition flourished in the early medieval Wei-Jin period, Daoism-inspired Dark Learning thinkers of the time also explored ways in which such a realm of solitude could be attained and enjoyed without the necessity of leaving behind the mundane world, an endeavor that has clear parallels with the function of solitude in Emerson's Transcendentalism. This paper focuses on three sites where both Emerson and Dark Learning thinkers located such access to solitude: aesthetic appreciation of nature, metaphysical speculation, and authentic social relationships. In both Emerson and Dark Learning, the universal implications of metaphysical speculation provided a path by which the solitude and independence attainable in the wilderness of nature could be connected to individuals in social life, providing a foundation for ethics outside of traditional authority that led both Emerson and Dark Learning to face similar criticisms from more conservative contemporaries.

Keywords: solitude; nature; Wei-Jin Dark Learning; Emerson; Daoism

1. Introduction

In both Chinese and Western thought, solitude has often been given an ambivalent status as both desirable and suspicious, offering an escape from the vicissitudes of social life and the potential for a more natural mode of existence in the wilderness of nature beyond human society, yet thereby also threatening traditional sources of authority. Such ambivalence is central to the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), whose early work "Nature" (1836) has been described as a "manifesto consecrated to the genius of solitude" (Gonnaud 1987, p. 183), but who came to develop a more subtle appreciation of the interplay between society and solitude in his later works. Likewise, although the Daoist tradition in China beginning with the *Laozi* 老子 represents "one of the earliest and subtlest expositions of the art of philosophical solitude" (Powys 1933, p. 10), and has often been associated with the practice of eremitic reclusion in "the cliffs and caves" (see e.g., Vervoorn 1990), many later threads of Daoism engaged in profound reflections on the function of solitude in society. This paper takes up one of these threads, namely the "Dark Learning" (*xuanxue* 玄學; also referred to as 'Neo-Daoism' or 'literati Daoism') that flourished in the early medieval Wei-Jin period (c. 200–300 CE) just prior to the widespread introduction of Buddhism in China, and examines how thinkers in this tradition used Daoist metaphysical speculation to connect the solitude attainable in the wilderness of nature with Confucian social ethics, thereby developing a form of moral "individualism" (see Yu 1985) that finds many echoes in Emersonian Transcendentalism.

After introducing the connection between solitude and nature in Emerson, the first section outlines how eremitic Daoist tropes concerning solitude in the wilderness were a common theme for escapist imaginative invention among Dark Learning poets such as Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263) and Ji Kang 嵇康 (c. 223–262), reflecting a yearning for a spiritual self-transcendence in the wilderness of nature comparable to that of Emerson and Thoreau,

and indeed implying a similar consciousness of its limitations in reality. Secondly, "solitude" (*du* 獨) was taken up as a key concept in Guo Xiang's 郭象 (c. 252–312) influential *Zhuangzi* 莊子 commentary, where it expresses not only the unique spiritual reality of the *dao* 道 of nature, but also the singular spontaneous (*ziran* 自然) haecceity of each individual existent at each moment, a transcendental "inherent nature" (*xing* 性), an approach that has clear parallels with the immanent pantheistic tendencies of Emerson's Transcendentalism. Thirdly, the imputed universality of such a metaphysical concept of solitude implies the possibility that, despite its apparent opposition to the social world and its artificial moral codes, it can also be at least partially expressed and captured in human relationships, a possibility taken up by Wei-Jin thinkers' attempts to formulate a distinctive Daoist ethics of authenticity, to which I argue that Guo Xiang also ascribes. Such attempts to find a means of expressing the wild spontaneity of nature on the plane of human existence via metaphysical speculation strongly resonates with Emerson's conception of solitude in society, and the final section of this paper takes up this comparison in considering parallel criticisms of this apparently "antinomian" aspect of both Dark Learning and Emerson, as well as how their parallel trajectories reveal similar attempts to respond to such criticisms with increasingly subtle conceptions of solitude that reflect its ambivalence.

2. Solitude in the Wilderness of Nature

2.1. Emerson on Solitude and Nature

From the famous opening words of his essay "Nature" (1836), Emerson makes clear that his concern with nature is one not only of detached intellectual contemplation or aesthetic enjoyment, but also of spiritual cultivation through an experience of solitude and isolation from the concerns of the human world: "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. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars" (Emerson 1950, p. 5). As Gonnaud notes, from his time at Harvard onward, solitude in fact became "the supreme means of cultivation" for Emerson (Gonnaud 1987, p. 30). Indeed, it is not only the society of other people that interferes with the purity of solitude he sought, as even being engaged in human cultural practices such as reading and writing implies some form of connection to humanity, and therefore also some degree of separation from nature itself. Instead, Emerson sought a pure, transcendental experience in which the distinction between self and other disappears completely, comparable to and indeed inspired by religious experiences of loss of self and unity with the absolute from Christian *kenosis* (self-emptying) and Plotinus' *henosis* (oneness) to Eastern traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism: "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 or parcel of God" (Emerson 1950, p. 6). What Emerson sought from the wilderness of nature then, was primarily a sense of "eternal calm" which has a "medicinal" function for anyone weary of daily life, one in which he "finds himself" (Emerson 1950, pp. 9–10) and experiences "the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable", namely a "harmony" between man and nature as a whole (Emerson 1950, p. 7).

However, as Emerson himself noted, this harmonious relation implies that such an experience of nature, although opposed to the world of ordinary human concerns, is nonetheless still "so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all and in every particular" (Emerson 1950, p. 35). In his 1837 Harvard Divinity School Address, the idealist underpinnings of this view are made even more explicit, namely the "sublime creed" that "the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere, in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool, active" (Emerson 1950, p. 69). In this sense, then, the solitude Emerson sought in nature was not a sublime experience of being alone in the face of an inhuman, alien and potentially threatening wilderness, but a comforting sense of being at one with a divine nature that is in harmony with humanity's ultimate moral concerns, where one can experience the univer-

sal truth of virtue and benevolence, gaining thereby the feeling that "Whilst a man seeks good ends, he is strong by the whole strength of nature" (Emerson 1950, p. 70), akin to the sense of cosmic righteousness found in Confucian thinkers such as Mencius 孟子 (see e.g., Bloom 2009, p. 30; this moral aspect is discussed in more detail below). Such solitude was thus also not dependent on his isolating himself in a vast pristine wilderness radically separated from the human world, but could equally be found in the "snow puddles" of a simple "bare common" or in the "fields and woods" where one can perceive the "waving of the boughs in the storm" (Emerson 1950, pp. 6–7), a bucolic experience as easily enjoyed in the common ground at the center of Concord villlage or the trees nearby as it would deep in the Appalachian mountains.

Unsurprisingly then, in such an experience, the aspect of nature that was of primary importance to Emerson was not the specific details of its objective structure or functioning, as investigated by modern science, or its wild, radical isolation from the human world, but rather the mystical subjective experience of absorption in unity mentioned above: "When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata, than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity" (Emerson 1950, p. 37). Indeed, even when Emerson describes nature as "a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths", a "constant exercise in the necessary lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being and seeming, of progressive arrangement; of ascent from particular to general; of combination to one end of manifold forces" (Emerson 1950, pp. 20–21), it is not the specific objective facts of such manifold variety that interest him, but rather how they express a "moral law" that "lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference", a "moral sentiment" that "scents the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world" (Emerson 1950, pp. 23–24). Emerson's foregrounding of this subjective aspect of our experience of nature as permeated by human, moral value, which he shared with other idealist and Romantic thinkers of the 19th century, clearly demonstrates that, unlike the modern movement of environmentalism with its anti-anthropocentric tendencies, his primary concern with nature lay not in the value of nature "in-itself", but rather with the benefits of nature for human life through the solitude it can provide.

This aspect of Emerson's thought concerning nature is clearly evident in the divergences between his views and thinkers with more concern for the natural world in itself, regardless of the uses or abuses to which it can be put by humanity. In an 1872 letter to renowned naturalist and pioneer of environmentalism John Muir (1838–1914), whom he had met in California the year before, Emerson chided Muir for his fondness for solitude and skepticism about human society as a whole, noting that "there are drawbacks also to Solitude, who is a sublime mistress, but an intolerable wife", and exhorting Muir to "bring to an early close your absolute contracts with any yet unvisited glaciers or volcanoes" (Emerson 1997, p. 442). Similarly, although Henry David Thoreau's (1817–1862) growing interest in nature was influenced by Emerson and his Transcendentalism, Emerson himself disapproved of "the hermit Thoreau" for "refusing to vote and for visiting town only for his mother's cooking" (Woodward-Burns 2016, p. 43), thereby neglecting to actively apply the moral lessons and spiritual cultivation attained in his experience of nature to improve human society. Thoreau's revelatory experience in *Walden* that "the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object", making "the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant" (Thoreau 2004, pp. 127–28), indeed seems to capture exactly the kind of more radical detachment from society that Emerson found morally unacceptable. These relatively minor disagreements in many ways echo debates among ancient Chinese thinkers, especially those seen as representing Confucianism and Daoism, and thus constitute important points to consider in any engagement between his thought and traditional Chinese thought.

2.2. Solitude and Nature in Daoism and Wei-Jin Dark Learning

Despite the relative lack of translated material from China in his time, Emerson himself was already aware of the prominence of solitude and nature in Chinese culture, specifically as expressed in the by now well-researched phenomenon of "hermits" (*yinshi* 隱士) in "reclusion" (*yinyi* 隱逸), seeking "a solitary retreat in a tranquil and beneficent wilderness, a timeless moment beyond the dust and din of the mundane world" (Berkowitz 1993, p. 575). However, given the fact that "[D]aoism exercised almost no influence in the West during the time of the Transcendentalists" (Versluis 1993, p. 42), Emerson was primarily aware of this aspect through its expression in the Confucian tradition, from which the more distinctively Daoist aspects of reclusion only later became differentiated in the West.

In early Chinese texts, tropes of reclusion frequently concerned what can be termed "moral reclusion", i.e., a virtuous individual's retreat from society into nature as a protest against or rejection of a corrupt society, as paradigmatically depicted in *Analects* 論語 18.8, in which Confucius 孔子 discusses seven prominent historical examples of "men who went into seclusion" and thereby "remained pure" to varying degrees, then goes on to distinguish himself from all of them since, unlike them, he has "no preconceived notions of what is permissible and what is not", i.e., no fixed view on the question of social service or reclusion (Slingerland 2003, pp. 218–19; on moral reclusion, see Berkowitz 1992). This text clearly implies the existence of other individuals who *did* have such preconceived notions, i.e., those who were in favor of serving rulers without regard for their morality, and those who were more absolute in their rejection of society and desire for reclusion, with the latter counting as more "pure" examples of hermits. While the *Analects* does include apocryphal references to figures who might represent the latter view, such as the three farming men in 18.6 and 18.7, Confucius rejects these by arguing that "A person cannot flock together with the birds and the beasts" (Slingerland 2003, p. 217), much as Emerson would later argue to Muir and Thoreau, clearly demonstrating his default preference for social life and reluctance to leave it behind for good unless absolutely necessary.

For examples of what such reclusive figures in early China might *themselves* have thought about reclusion, we can look for references to solitude and nature in early Daoist texts. In chp. 20 of the *Laozi* 老子, the normally invisible author suddenly offers a poetic account of his feeling of being alone, alienated, and different from the "multitude" or "common people" (*zhongren* 眾人, *suren* 俗人):

> "Common people are clearly obvious, but I alone am cryptically obscure.
>
> Common people are meticulously discriminating, but I alone muddle everything together.
>
> Floating indifferently, oh, as if out on the sea; blown about by the wind, oh, I seem to have no place to stop.
>
> Common people all would have purpose, but I alone am doltish and rustic.
>
> I alone with to be different from others, and so value drawing sustenance from the mother". (Lynn 1999, pp. 84–85)

Although this passage does not explicitly reference reclusion in nature, and has been interpreted as expressing the ideal attitudes of the detached "Daoist sage ruler" (Moeller 2007, p. 50), its references to solitude, wandering, and drawing sustenance from the *dao* 道 of nature, along with passages in the *Laozi* discussing processes of decay and corruption in society (e.g., chp. 18, 38), mean that it can be understood more broadly to express a general psychological and indeed physical state, one of separation and detachment from the ordinary human world and its common values.

While such passages from the *Laozi* require some interpretive work to connect them directly to specific aspects of solitude and reclusion, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 makes such connections explicit, with Zhuangzi himself having been described as "aside from Confucius . . . the single most important figure in the history of Chinese eremitism", and in particular the one who did the most to transform reclusion from a resigned response to "adverse circumstance" into "the highest ideal to which a man can aspire" (Vervoorn 1990, pp. 55–56).

However, while oft-quoted anecdotes such as the story of the mythical "Divine man" (*shenren* 神人) living on Guye Mountain who "does not eat the five grains but only imbibes the wind and drinks the dew" (chp. 1 "Free and Distant Wandering"; Lynn 2022, p. 12) and the account of Zhuangzi's famous preference to "drag my tail in the mud" like a tortoise rather than accept an invitation to serve in the administration of a state (chp. 17 "Autumn Floods"; Lynn 2022, p. 324) clearly reflect ideals of solitary reclusion and spiritual cultivation in nature, other passages in the text problematize any attempt to portray Zhuangzi as a proponent of eremitic reclusion in the wilderness. For example, the opening of chp. 15 "Honing the Will" lists various categories of scholars who retreat from the world out of moral condemnation, idle leisure or desire for longevity, all of which are regarded as inferior to the "virtue of the sage" who effortlessly achieves a tranquil impartiality without need for such deliberate withdrawal (Lynn 2022, pp. 294–95). Similarly, chp. 20 "The Mountain Tree", which like chp. 1 contains several anecdotes concerning the virtues of uselessness, opens with a passage that explicitly undermines any attempt to simply replace the common focus on social usefulness with an endorsement of the uselessness of reclusion, instead arguing that one who truly "wanders together with the First Ancestor of the myriad things" as depicted in the above passage from the *Laozi* is "Free from praise and censure, now a dragon, now a snake; he transforms with the moment, unwilling to be any one particular thing; now increasing now decreasing, he forms his size in harmonious accord" (Lynn 2022, p. 354). Such statements clearly resonate with Confucius' own reluctance to take any fixed position on reclusion, as noted above, albeit with the *Zhuangzi* displaying a greater focus on the aspect of avoiding trouble through flexible accommodation rather than on reflecting the complexities of real-life situations in applying moral principles.

As Vervoorn notes, this more subtle position is one in which reclusion is not abandoned, but rather transformed into "a type of hiding that takes place within society rather than outside it", one concerned with "making oneself invisible by doing away with any outstanding characteristics or abilities" (Vervoorn 1990, p. 58). This form of reclusion would have a far-reaching influence on later Chinese thought, especially in the Han and Wei-Jin dynasties, where the concept of "eremitism at court" developed, enabling scholar-officials to claim the same spiritual detachment and transcendence as a Daoist hermit while enjoying the benefits of social position and high office (see Vervoorn 1990, pp. 203–27; Jia 2015). Reflecting this development, in the Wei-Jin dynasties, which have been described as "the golden age of Chinese eremitism" (Vervoorn 1990, p. viii; Berkowitz 1993, p. 578), while there were still "true" hermits who left society behind to live in the mountains, these frequently appear as a literary trope and spiritual ideal for literati rather than a practical choice.

A good example of this relation can be seen in the two opening tales concerning hermits in chp. 18 "Reclusion and Disengagement" of *A New Account of Tales of the World* 世說新語, in which two key figures of Dark Learning, Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, are both depicted as "wandering in the mountains" and briefly meeting hermit-like figures with mystical abilities or wisdom (Liu 2002, pp. 354–56). Here, although Ruan and Ji's appreciation for and fascination with a life of solitude "riding alone wherever his fancy led him, not following the roads or byways, to the point where carriage tracks would go no further" (Liu 2002, pp. 354–55) is made clear, they themselves did not commit to such a way of life, but rather inevitably returned to society, where Ji would eventually be put to death for his outspokenness while Ruan found ways to hide himself amidst the surrounding social pressures, as suggested in the *Zhuangzi*. The attraction that solitude in nature held for them was then primarily expressed through the aesthetic imagination of their poetry, in what has been called a "mystical escapism" (Balazs 1964, pp. 236–42) or "ecstatic exploration of the otherworld" (Kohn 1992, pp. 96–108). As Holzman points out, although Ruan was certainly "tempted by the pursuit of immortality, profoundly attracted by the mystical bliss that the immortals enjoyed far from the world of men", in his poetry, he generally used such images "more as allegorical symbols than as expressions of his 'innermost thoughts'" (Holzman 1976, p. 153). Similarly, while solitude is a frequent theme of his po-

ems, the most extreme of which even "raised his loneliness to metaphysical proportions" and portray him as "absolutely alone in the entire universe", this finally only served to demonstrate "his complete disillusionment with society as he actually saw it about him", and thus paradoxically how "profoundly attached" he was to social life (Holzman 1976, pp. 134–36).

As for Ji Kang, his poetry frequently expresses a similar yearning "to ride the cloud and roam the Eight Extremes" with Daoist immortals (Owen and Swartz 2017, p. 321), and his appreciation for the natural wilderness is even more prominent in texts such as his extended lyric depiction of mountains and rivers in his "Rhapsody on the Zither" 琴賦:

> "Dark ridges, precipitous bluffs,
>
> Towering and tall, jagged and jutting,
>
> Crimson cliffs fall sharply downward,
>
> Verdant walls rise ten thousand fathoms high.
>
> Then layered peaks rise one above another,
>
> Surging so high they seem covered by clouds.
>
> From afar, they tower over all in supreme might;
>
> Lofty crests burgeon forth in singular splendor . . .
>
> Men wander and linger about in it for its natural divine beauty, which suffices
> to arouse adoration and delight". (Owen and Swartz 2017, pp. 361–65).

While such poems seem to take the wilderness of nature as possessing an inherent value, other texts show how Ji regarded his aesthetic conception and "taste for independence" as largely a product of his own liberal upbringing, "aggravated" by his reading *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* (Henricks 1983, p. 7), which led him to regard attaining the kind of "detached ease" required for practicing eremitism at court as something that "would indeed be hard for me, since it is not what my heart likes" (Owen and Swartz 2017, p. 331). In this sense, despite his evident love of the wilderness, Ji in fact also acknowledged the superiority of the court-eremitism ideal, but simply thought himself unable to accept it due to his own limitations, which had left him with an excessively headstrong nature and a reluctance to compromise his desire for transcendence by confronting it with a harsh social reality. He therefore felt he had no choice but to "pluck my zither and raise a lone song" in the hope that "there are those who can follow me" (ibid.), as happened when Ji's charismatic example led to the group of "the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove" gathering around him in the "political refuge" of Shanyang (see Lo 2015, pp. 430–32). As will be discussed in more detail below, this attempt to "create a perfect and secure private society in the face of chaos and upheaval in the world at large" (Kohn 1992, p. 101) can also be seen as demonstrating that what Ji in fact desired was, rather than the pristine solitude of nature, primarily a more authentic form of social life that would not demand he repress his more outspoken and idiosyncratic tendencies.

From the above, it can be seen that even Dark Learning thinkers such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang, who are usually regarded as the most extreme in their rejection of social norms and desire for spiritual transcendence in the wilderness, in fact combined aspects of Daoist and Confucian views of solitude and nature, valuing these at least partly as a result of their disillusionment with the decaying society in which they found themselves, with which the apparent beauty and harmony of nature provided a stark contrast. In this, their views can be fruitfully compared with those of Emerson, who recognized how "As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident", leading us to become "strangers in nature" who "do not understand the notes of birds" and are feared and attacked by wild animals (Emerson 1950, p. 36), a conception that could have been lifted directly from the account of how the "world of perfect virtue" where "people lived together with the birds and beasts" and "joined in kinship with the myriad creatures" fell into decline in chp. 8 "Horses' Hooves" of the *Zhuangzi* (Lynn 2022, p. 193). Like Emerson, however, their idealized view of a prelapsarian state of nature was tempered by an acceptance that

society could and indeed *should* be able to express such ideals, albeit with Emerson being able to see the potential for assisting in such political transformation in his own society, while Ruan and Ji only saw the option of lamenting the state of the world and seeking to preserve an alternative in Shanyang.

3. Metaphysical Solitude

For both Emerson and Wei-Jin Dark Learning then, the virtues of the solitude possible in nature should ideally be able to be located not only in literary fantasy or actual eremitic reclusion, but anywhere, including in society itself, and both sought to base an account of such possibilities on a metaphysical conception of human nature in which individuals can to varying degrees gain access to and express nature as a whole.

In Emerson, such a view is most clearly expressed in his 1841 essays "Self-Reliance" and "The Over-Soul", both of which fully reflect the immanent, pantheistic, and indeed quasi-Spinozistic tendencies of his conception of God and nature. In "Self-Reliance", Emerson does not merely describe the empirical virtues of self-reliance and life in nature, as might be found in, e.g., Thoreau's depictions of life in solitude in *Walden* (e.g., Thoreau 2004, pp. 125–34), but attempts to raise such practical solitude up to a metaphysical or ontological level: "We must go alone . . . But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation" (Emerson 1950, pp. 159–60). Such elevation aims at realizing the eternal perfection that was traditionally attributed to God or nature as a whole in all individual existents, such that each is able to share in this beatitude. Emerson here sees this as the case even for flowers, which he views as possessing an inherent self-satisfaction with their own being: "There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence . . . Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike" (Emerson 1950, p. 157). However, while existents such as flowers naturally and spontaneously possess such a quality, Emerson views humanity as having lost this due to the "degeneration" mentioned above, descending into what he calls "the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times" (Emerson 1950, p. 153). Already in "Nature", he had described this "corruption of man" as happening "When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires—the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise—and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth" (Emerson 1950, p. 17). The key message of "Self-Reliance" is thus that such alienation from natural simplicity can be reversed, since even where it is occluded by the above artificialities, human individuals nonetheless still latently possess the inherent metaphysical independence of the rose and all other entities, and therefore are able to return to a true state of being in which they are united with nature and creation as a whole: "a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things. Where he is, there is nature . . . Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it takes place of the whole creation" (Emerson 1950, pp. 153–54).

If "Self-Reliance" already elevates the status of human individuals to a spiritual level, even if only potentially, "The Over-Soul" pushes this to an extreme, and in particular focuses on the fact that such unity between individuals and the whole can only be attained at the level of the soul, such that the objective phenomena of nature themselves are reduced in importance in relation to the immortality in which the soul is able to partake. For Emerson here, where our ordinary experience of phenomena is fragmentary and divided, such that "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles", we nonetheless also have direct access to the whole of nature, with all the eternal perfection this implies: "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" which is "self-sufficing and perfect in every hour" (Emerson 1950, p. 262). Since such unity is always present, as "the individual soul always merges with the universal soul" (Emerson 1950, p. 270), its realization simply requires that one open oneself to this immanent voice, to enter into a state in which "The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it" (Emerson 1950, p. 277), echoing

the Plotinian "flight of the alone to the Alone" (see e.g., Corrigan 1996). The mystical over-tones of this state make it perhaps unsurprising that, although Emerson describes such unity as one in which "the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" (Emerson 1950, p. 262), he nonetheless goes on to note that it has narcissistic tendencies that imply a neglect of the objective and ephemeral realities of natural phenomena: "I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect. I am somehow receptive of the great soul, and thereby I do overlook the sun and the stars and feel them to be the fair accidents and effects which change and pass" (Emerson 1950, p. 277). Such metaphysical solitude is thus in many ways even more extreme than the solitude in nature described above, tending towards the "pure immanence" of "the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name" proposed by Gilles Deleuze in his final essay (see Deleuze 2001, p. 29), and perhaps reflecting the alleged "character of pagan mystical thought" such as that of Plotinus: "self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing" (Corrigan 1996, p. 28).

Even from this brief summary, some similarities between Emerson's view and Daoism should be obvious, in particular the depiction of a decline from a prelapsarian state of nat-ural perfection to a world corrupted by human artificiality and excess, which as suggested above are near-omnipresent themes in both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Like Emerson, the *Laozi* also responds to such decline and fragmentation by proposing a form of "reversion" (*fan* 反) or "return" (*fugui* 復歸), such as the sage returning to the undivided "uncarved block" (*pu* 樸) of the *dao* as a whole in chp. 28 (Lynn 1999, p. 103), and how the myr-iad things each "flourish" yet eventually return to their "root" (*gen* 根) of emptiness and quietude in chp. 16 (Lynn 1999, pp. 75–76). In both these cases, this return implies a re-duction or elimination of excessive desire and thus the attainment of a form of inherent self-satisfaction through unity with the eternal *dao* which, like Emerson's Over-Soul, lacks nothing and "stands alone, unchanged" (*duli bugai* 獨立不改) in chp. 25 (Lynn 1999, p. 94). Combining these statements with those from chp. 20 quoted in Section 2.2 above, it is thus implied that, in attaining such unity, the things that return also gain a form of spiritual solitude, sharing in the aloneness of the *dao*, although this is not stated as explicitly as in Emerson.

Such a view is stated slightly more directly in chp. 6 "The Great Exemplary Teacher" of the *Zhuangzi*, where an account of the key stages in the study of the *dao* includes "putting things outside oneself" (*waiwu* 外物), perceiving "perfect independence" (*du* 獨; lit. "soli-tude", "aloneness"), and then achieving a state of eternity with no past or present (Lynn 2022, p. 140) like that of Emerson's roses, who "make no reference to former roses or to bet-ter ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them" (Emerson 1950, p. 157). However, it is made most explicit in Wei-Jin scholar Guo Xiang's in-fluential commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, and in particular its distinctive and much-discussed concept of "lone-transformation" (*duhua* 獨化; see Ziporyn 2003, pp. 99–123; translated as "independent transformation" in Lynn 2022). This term is often understood as a primarily ontological concept, referring to the way in which all individual existents (*you* 有) exist and transform "independently" without any ontological dependence on either one another or a more fundamental ground or substance, a form of "ontological individualism" in which he is frequently accused of forgetting or denying the Heideggerian ontological difference between Being/*dao* and beings/things (see Shen 2013, p. 177). However, as Ziporyn notes, Guo clearly "acknowledges the mutual interaction of things, and even that they need one another in order to be what they are" (Ziporyn 2003, p. 105), and he also explicitly affirms the existence of *dao* as distinct from things in his *Laozi* commentary (see Gao 2022), both of which problematize any attempt to portray Guo as simply denying *dao* altogether, as most notably argued by Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (see Feng 2001, pp. 516–25).

Considered in the context of the discussions of solitude above, it should perhaps be more obvious that Guo's concept of "lone-transformation" should be understood not pri-marily as an ontological theory, but also and even primarily as expressing an ideal *subjec-tive state* of existents, one in which they are "alone" in the Emersonian sense of possessing

an inherent self-satisfaction with their own being due to unity with nature as a whole, as in Guo's related concept of "self-fulfilment" or "spontaneous attainment" (*zide* 自得), which appears over 100 times in his commentary. Such a view is consistent with examples found in early Daoist texts such as the two "Techniques of the Mind" 心術 chapters of the *Guanzi* 管子, in which we read that "when [the mind] is calm, it can concentrate; when it concentrates, solitude (*du* 獨) is established; once it is in solitude, it can be clear, and once it is clear, it can be numinous" (see Rickett 1998, p. 76, where *du* is translated as "detached"), in which the term cannot plausibly be interpreted in ontological terms, but clearly refers to a psychological or spiritual state of unity with *dao*. This usage is also continuous with the later Song-Ming Neo-Confucian interpretation of the Confucian concept of "care for solitude" (*shendu* 慎獨), which was often understood by mainstream pre- and post-Song-Ming Confucian commentators as referring to self-discipline when one is physically alone and not being watched by others, following Han dynasty commentaries. More recent excavated texts have, however, shown that the Neo-Confucian interpretation, which Du Weiming 杜維明 describes as referring to a return to "the essential 'solitariness'—the singularity, uniqueness, and innermost core—of the self" before one comes into contact with external things and emotions are aroused (Tu 1989, p. 109), was in fact probably closer to the original meaning, which was glossed as "casting aside external sensations" (*sheti* 舍體) (Liang 2014, p. 307).

On this interpretation then, Guo's notion of "lone-transformation" is inseparable from his controversial understanding of the *Zhuangzi*'s "free and distant wandering" (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊), which he also interprets as referring to a self-satisfied, self-sufficient but relative subjective state that all existents are in principle capable of sharing, as opposed to the later views of e.g., Buddhist monk Zhi Daolin 支道林 (314–366), Buddhism-inspired Neo-Confucian Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (c. 1193–1270) and many modern scholars such as Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢, all of whom insist that it should refer only to an ideal state of absolute spiritual transcendence only attainable by the perfected Daoist sage, and thus something that can only be a goal for spiritual cultivation (see Machek 2010; Liu 2015, p. 211). On Guo's view, such an ideal state, which he also describes as having "no mind" (*wuxin* 無心) is instead something that we inherit originally from nature, and which we can only attain by returning, rather than striving forward, as he notes in a comment on chp. 11 "Leave Things Alone": "The Earth has no mind, so since I am born from that which has no mind, I should again guard such state of no mind and carry on alone" (Lynn 2022, p. 217). The fact that Emerson explicitly attributes such a state to ordinary natural existents such as roses, and indeed regards humans as in some sense uniquely responsible for corrupting this original state with artificial interference, clearly suggests that his notion of metaphysical solitude is, in this respect, closer to that of Guo than the more absolute versions proposed by later commentators.

4. Solitude and Social Authenticity

As the controversy over Guo Xiang's "free and distant wandering" suggests, there is an essential ambiguity in his subtle conception of metaphysical solitude, one that can also be found in Emerson, and that concerns the concrete implications of "merging" (or "vanishing" [*ming* 冥] in Guo's terms) the singular or individual into the whole or universal. For Guo, these implications are obviously and fundamentally dependent on the inherent nature (*xing* 性) of the individual concerned: since sages possess a perfectly placid and limpid inherent nature, their merging implies being empty of any partiality or dependence (*wudai* 無待) and thus being able to adapt to any external environment, as in the dragon-like ability to transform with the moment in the *Zhuangzi* mentioned in Section 2.2 above. For all other non-sagely existents, however, such "merging" is necessarily relativized and dependent (*youdai* 有待) on various internal (their own unique inherent nature and character) and external (being able to satisfy their basic needs and desires, finding a suitable position in society, etc.) factors, such that they are only able to achieve such a state under certain conditions (see Lynn 2022, pp. 6–9). For the latter group, Guo is absolutely clear that they

cannot change their inherent natures, and must be authentic to it: "to try to change one's basic nature is to reject the thing one is. To be a thing and yet try not to be that thing, if this does not lead to disaster, what does!" (Lynn 2022, p. 433). Clearly, these implications are directly connected to various questions concerning solitude and nature discussed above, such as Ji Kang's inability to compromise his desire for transcendence, and the question of whether or not a "medicinal" experience of solitude in nature is necessary in order to clear one's mind of social alienation.

In Emerson, a similar issue can be noted: while his account of becoming a selfless "transparent eyeball" of nothingness through which the currents of nature can pass seems to echo the perfect limpidity of the Daoist sage, his later discussions in "Self-Reliance" and other texts advocate a much more solid and concrete notion of authenticity and self, one in which retaining one's unique individual character is supreme and conformity with the world is anathema: "No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature" (Emerson 1950, p. 148). For him, there can be no perfectly balanced nature like that of the sage, since "Nature sends no creature, no man into the world without adding a small excess of his proper quality" (Emerson 1950, pp. 414–15). Indeed, Emerson's interest in solitude in nature is at least partly premised on the fact that "the voices which we hear in solitude" provide us with "an independent, genuine verdict" that is unencumbered by the "consequences" and "interests" that plague social life (Emerson 1950, pp. 147–48). Interestingly, according to the account given in his preface to the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang regarded Zhuangzi himself as precisely one of these genuine voices from outside the ordinary social world who never kept his "wild talk" to himself, and therefore judged him as not achieving the "canonical" status of records of selfless sages, yet nonetheless being "still the absolute best of all the non-canonical philosophers" (Lynn 2022, p. 565). As Versluis argues, however, the difference between Emerson's two descriptions of self in "Nature" and "Self-Reliance" should not be overstated, and the same is true for Guo's account of non-sages. Even where he focused on the distinctive character of each individual, Emerson like Guo still emphasized the importance of transcending the narrow-mindedness of the ordinary self: "in Emerson's works, self-transcendence is central to self-actualization. Without transcending the passional ego, the true self cannot be revealed" (Versluis 1993, p. 67). As discussed above, it is here that the "medicinal" function has a central role to play.

Furthermore, as scholars have previously noted, a gradual shift can be seen in Emerson's work, one in which, while he retained his early advocation of solitude and nature, he became increasingly concerned with how to apply the authentic voice of solitude in social affairs (see e.g., Gonnaud 1987; Woodward-Burns 2016). A suggestion of the direction Emerson took can be seen in "Self-Reliance" (1841), when he states that "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" (Emerson 1950, p. 150). Here, it is not solitude itself that is valuable, but rather the independence of mind that it offers. For one who is able to retain this, recourse to actual solitude in nature would presumably be unnecessary. In "The Transcendentalist" around the same time, Emerson was concerned precisely with justifying the presence of such great men in society, offering a plea for society to "tolerate one or two solitary voices in the land, speaking for thoughts and principles not marketable or perishable" (Emerson 1950, p. 103), again implying that it is the authenticity and independence of solitude and its social role that was his primary concern. Indeed, it was against this background in 1843 that Emerson transcribed the *Analects* passage containing Confucius' "birds and beasts" argument against reclusion (*Analects* 18.6; quoted in Section 2.2 above) under the heading "Reform", and as Versluis notes, "the Confucian ideal of the ethical, solitary, learned, and decorous man certainly appealed to Emerson's sense of himself in the face of all the retreats from society in which the other Transcendentalists engaged" (Versluis 1993, pp. 70–71). By the time of his late work *Society and Solitude* (1870), Emerson was directly stating that "Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal", and arguing that one must instead make a "diagonal line" between the two, since "Society and solitude are deceptive names. It is not the

circumstance of seeing more or fewer people, but the readiness of sympathy, that imports" (Emerson 1950, pp. 745–46). Where a society could afford such sympathy, there would apparently no longer be a need for solitude.

The development of Dark Learning in the Wei-Jin period has often been viewed as following a course comparable to this, from a "confrontation" between traditional "conformity" or the "teaching of names" (i.e., the Confucian code of social morality) and the new individualist doctrine of "naturalness" or "spontaneity" (Daoism, as interpreted in Dark Learning) in the early period to a final synthesis achieved by Guo Xiang (see Mather 1969). A common interpretation of this is that, while the early period of Dark Learning represented by e.g., Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 CE), Ruan Ji and Ji Kang advocated a liberating form of what Mather describes as a quasi-Existentialist "'situation ethics,' in which no preexistent or prescriptive framework circumscribes the individual's free choice of what is right for the immediate situation" (Mather 1969, p. 165), later thinkers such as Xiang Xiu 向秀 (c. 221–280) and Guo Xiang designed their ideas as a compromise in which "the paradoxes and tensions between officialdom and eremitism, having the Way and lacking the Way, court and mountain, wealth and poverty, and life and death were wiped out", since "Scholar-officials no longer had to make a choice between opposites. They simply followed their calling to take officialdom and serve society, while keeping a carefree, detached mind" (Jia 2015, p. 554). To some degree, this latter view imputed to Guo finds an echo in Moeller and D'Ambrosio's postmodern interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* as advocating a "genuine pretending" that is able to survive and indeed flourish as a "joker card" or "smooth operator" in any social situation, including the Confucian officialdom of the Western Jin dynasty, as opposed to any notion of Existentialist authenticity or Confucian sincerity (see Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017).

While support for such a view can indeed be found in the *Zhuangzi* itself as noted above, in relation to Guo, it neglects his crucial distinction between the sage and the non-sage, as well as his praise for Zhuangzi's genuine voice as noted above, and his own reported outspokenness. For Guo, the flexibility to accord with any situation is a property embodied by the *sage*, and not by others, who are inevitably limited in countless ways by their own individual idiosyncrasies, and thus unable to "vanish" smoothly into an infinite multiplicity of different situations. To demand that non-sages nonetheless strive to do so would precisely be to impose a preexistent or prescriptive moral framework onto their conduct, one that would be in many ways more exacting and restrictive than the traditional Confucian morality it aims at replacing, effectively demanding that all individuals eradicate all individual preference and become simply faceless and interchangeable "joker cards". In relation to solitude then, Guo attempts to allow a space for individuals to locate their own "diagonal line" between solitude and official service, opposing any attempt to impose a unified moral code onto the world. Such a view is more in line with earlier Wei-Jin thinkers who also endorsed a notion of authenticity and individuality, albeit one that retains a space for the sage's unique form of empty authenticity alongside a more substantial form similar to that found in Emerson.

5. Antinomian Arguments

Given the similarities between the notions of solitude and its connection to forms of authenticity found in Emerson and Dark Learning, it is perhaps unsurprising neither that the latter like the former has been described as an "individualism" (see Yu 1985), nor that both have frequently been targeted for criticism in this respect by proponents of more traditional and conservative social moral codes, especially as both placed significant value on the outspokenness of "genuine voices" as opposed to social conformity. Nonetheless, the specific arguments in these respects differed in important ways.

Emerson's controversy was primarily based on the self-evident pantheistic and rationalistic tendencies of his thought, which, like that of Spinoza before him, was thus seen as a threat to traditional religious authority and "a slippery slope to atheism", implying as it did a critique of the miraculous claims of "historical Christianity" (Buell 2003, p. 161).

However, as Buell notes, while Andrews Norton's critique followed these lines, comparing Emerson as the "latest form of infidelity" to the allegedly atheistic tendencies of Spinoza and Hume (see Norton 1839), other responses to his notorious Divinity School Address at Harvard focused not on his humanistic critique of orthodox religion, but rather on the "impersonal" and "inhuman" aspects of his new form of spirituality, with its accompanying connections to Eastern religions (Buell 2003, pp. 165–69). In such critiques, it was Emerson's denial of anthropomorphism with its anthropocentric concern for humanity that was most unacceptable, since it apparently removes humanity from its position of centrality within nature. From Emerson's perspective, however, "Depersonalization was indispensable to a truly privatized spirituality" (ibid.), since only an impersonal spirituality based on that which is common to all could avoid the danger of "antinomianism", which Emerson knew would arise: "The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes" (Emerson 1950, p. 161).

Emerson's concerns about antinomianism and abuse are mirrored in criticisms directed at Dark Learning by Confucian critics such as Pei Wei 裴頠 (267–300), who argued in his essay "On the Exaltation of Existence" 崇有論 that, since Dark Learning thinkers followed Daoism in diminishing the value of the social world and seeking to transcend it, they would inevitably end up neglecting moral codes and ritual propriety, and thus be left with a situation in which "there is then no means of governing left" (Balazs 1964, p. 252). As with antinomianism in Emerson's time, Pei's concern here was exactly that a "rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard", rather than an attempt to seek a standard outside of orthodox tradition, and like Emerson himself, Dark Learning thinkers responded by arguing that the tradition itself had betrayed its original meaning and been reduced to mere "traces" (*ji* 跡) of its original spirit. Responding to the decline in social cohesion at the end of the Han dynasty, the Confucianism of the Wei-Jin period as represented by figures such as Pei, Fu Yi 伏義 in his debate with Ruan Ji (see Holzman 1976, pp. 82–87), or Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217–278) in his *Fuzi* 傅子 was primarily focused on manipulating instruments such as social reputation and material reward to organize society, as proposed by Xunzi 荀子 and Legalism in accordance with their more skeptical and realistic conception of human nature as inherently self-interested. In this respect, more idealistically-minded Dark Learning thinkers such as Ruan Ji and Ji Kang were arguably closer to earlier Confucian thought from Confucius to Mencius with its focus on inculcating the moral independence to "stand alone and pursue one's way in solitude" (*The Book of Rites* 禮記, quoted in Roetz 2016, pp. 308–9), and thus naturally found the pragmatic Confucianism of their time distasteful.

While these debates focused primarily on the social consequences of Dark Learning, and notably lack anything comparable to the controversies over miracles or personal/impersonal spirituality in Emerson's day, they arguably share points of similarity in the disagreement with the more optimistic view of human nature found in Emerson and Dark Learning, as well as an insistence that philosophies and values must be centered on human society itself, with any attempt to seek standards in nature or an "impersonal spirituality" such as *dao* being regarded as inherently suspicious.

6. Conclusions

Introducing his study of Chinese environmental history, Mark Elvin once pondered the question of commensurability between radically separate cultural traditions, wondering, "how far are we justified in seeing the medieval Chinese passion for mountains and the early modern European passion as sufficiently comparable to justify more than casual comparison?" (Elvin 2004, p. xxii). While a detailed comparison of these two cultural phenomena lies well beyond the scope of this paper, the significant similarities between the attitudes toward solitude in nature found in Emerson and Wei-Jin Dark Learning certainly suggest that such a comparison would be justified. These similarities include the debates and dilemmas over the relation between reclusion, self-cultivation and social re-

sponsibility, the way in which solitude in nature was elevated to a metaphysical plane, and the individualist ethic of authenticity that accompanied these, belying Charles Taylor's assumption that "The ethic of authenticity is something relatively new and peculiar to modern culture" (Taylor 1991, p. 25). While the two are not without their important differences, especially the role of the sage in Dark Learning, their common concern with what solitude in the wilderness of nature can offer human life is clear, and can be summed up in Emerson's statement that "Society is good when it does not violate me, but best when it is likest to solitude" (Emerson 1950, p. 90).

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