

## 1. TRANSCENDENTALISM

The Transcendentalist movement was a reaction against 18th century rationalism. It was a reflection of the politically independent nation that was searching for his own philosophy based on the belief in the unity of the world and God. Transcendentalism represented an optimistic romantic philosophy that influenced many significant American thinkers, poets and artists who were seeking to express American experience.

In 1836, in Concord, a small New England village near Boston. The movement is mainly associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who moved to Concord in 1834, and Henry David Thoreau. Other influential members include ministers Frederick Henry Hedge, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker (abolitionist and minister), and George Ripley; the philosopher Amos Bronson Alcott, poet Jones Very and Margaret Fuller. The Transcendental Club was founded in 1836.

The Transcendentalists published a quarterly magazine, *The Dial*, which lasted four years from 1840 to 1844 and was first edited by Margaret Fuller and later by Emerson. Many Transcendentalists were abolitionists, and some were involved in experimental utopian communities, e.g. Brook Farm (described in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*) and Fruitlands. Brook farm was founded in 1841 by George Ripley.

Unlike many other groups or movements, the Transcendentalists did not publish a manifesto. They insisted on individual differences, yet they shared a common interest in advancing the state of American thought, religion and culture. After America gained its political independence, it started searching for the cultural one. The Transcendentalists called for unique American forms and voice.

In many ways, Transcendentalism is inspired by British Romanticism. Both movements share the optimistic and idealistic vision of the world, appreciation of nature, seeing emotions as more valuable than reason, belief in individual and his powers, mistrust in traditions and creative potential of artists. The term transcendentalism also pointed to the idealistic philosophy of Immanuel Kant and neo-platonism.

The founder and main representative of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), studied at Harvard University. He later became a priest of Boston's Second Church, yet his liberalism and abolitionism was unacceptable. After his wife died of tuberculosis, he left for Europe where he became acquainted with British Romanticism, mainly of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. When he came back to Concord, he gathered around him a group of scholars who shared his vision of American culture and started giving public lectures.

His preference of personal experience over tradition has been expressed in a Phi Beta Kappa address, known also as "The American Scholar" (1837). He urged the audience to become independent in their thinking and rely on American resources, mainly nature. Oliver Wendell Holmes called it "our intellectual Declaration of Independence." Emerson called here for a national literature and culture that would be independent of British literature. He insisted on greater intellectual independence and gave a list of features that the American scholar has and should have:

The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find, — so entire, so boundless. (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 51)

The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar, is, the mind of the Past, — in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth, — learn the amount of this influence more conveniently, — by considering their value alone. (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 53)

Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, — the act of thought, — is transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence, the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees.

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 53–54)

There goes in the world a notion, that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian, — as unfit for any handiwork or public labor, as a penknife for an axe. The so-called 'practical men' sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or *see*, they could do nothing. I have heard it said that the clergy, — who are always, more universally than any other class, the scholars of their day, — are addressed as women; that the rough, spontaneous conversation of men they do not hear, but only a mincing and diluted speech. They are often virtually disfranchised; and, indeed, there are advocates for

their celibacy. As far as this is true of the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it, he is not yet man. Without it, thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 57).

The students should not spend their time reading books and consuming their message, but rather create their own thoughts. As Emerson believed all human beings can and should a fulfilled life and to function as limited economic fragments. As Emerson observed: "The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters, — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man. Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things" (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 50) The American scholar, or the "Man Thinking" should be able to unite all individuals of the young Republic into a nation. Emerson's philosophy was humanism coming out of idealistic metaphysics. He was celebrating individuality and self-reliance, yet at the same he was emphasizing the interconnectedness of the self with the oversoul, or God.

In his lecture "The Transcendentalist" (1841) he tried to explain this new movement as follows:

It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*. (Emerson, *Transcendentalist*, 97)

Although, as we have said, there is no pure Transcendentalist, yet the tendency to respect the intuitions, and to give them, at least in our creed, all authority over our experience, has deeply colored the conversation and poetry of the present day; and the history of genius and of religion in these times, though impure, and as yet not incarnated in any powerful individual, will be the history of this tendency. (Emerson, *On Transcendentalism*, 98)

Emerson claimed that transcendentalism was idealism in opposition to materialism.

Most of his major ideas: the need for a new national vision, relying on personal experience and the notion of the cosmic Over-Soul are mentioned already in his first anonymous publication, of his most famous essay *Nature* (1836), "a reflective

prose poem" as he called it. For Emerson, nature was the outside world and everything it contains.

*Nature* begins with a proclamation: "Our age is retrospective." Yet Emerson is critical to this tendency to resort to history and traditions. What he wants is original and new relationship to the world and God. The whole following essay is trying to present how is it possible and why is it natural and desirable. The narrator asks, what is the purpose of nature, and in increasingly complex sequence of answers, its functions are explained. From the most basic "commodity" (materials) through mystical "Spirit" (nature as evidence of divine thoughts and order), Emerson systematically builds the interconnectedness of spirit and the material world. That is possible only when we see clearly.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862), of French and Scottish descent, was born in Concord where he stayed for the rest of his life. From a poor family, like Emerson, he studied at Harvard. In 1846 Thoreau spent a night in Concord jail for refusing to pay six years' worth of poll taxes that he owed because he did not wish to support a government that supported the Mexican American War and legalized slavery. Aside from his stay at Walden Pond, Thoreau is best known for this act of disobedience. He recounted it in an 1848 lecture, which was later published in 1849 in Elizabeth Peabody's journal *Aesthetic Papers* as "Resistance to Civil Government," an essay that is better known as "Civil Disobedience." Thoreau wrote two other essays—"Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854) and "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1860)—that also deal with the right of individuals to protest against a corrupted government. This notion can be traced back to the *Declaration of Independence*, which rejected the divine right of kings in the name of democracy, yet democracy itself has been changed into the rule of the majority. By proposing non-conformist individualistic behaviour Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience reflects both Romantic and Transcendentalist ideas.

His abolitionist ideas Thoreau expressed in "Slavery in Massachusetts" at an abolitionist meeting in Framingham, Massachusetts on 4 July 1854, soon after the rendition of Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave, in Massachusetts. Abolitionists attacked the federal courthouse in Boston where Burns was being tried. Thoreau openly opposed the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law that enabled Burns to be caught and returned to his owner. Thoreau criticizes the violation of human rights and for the first time believes in the moral communal disobedience against the authorities.

Thoreau's masterpiece, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), is the result of two years, two months, and two days (from 1845 to 1847) he spent at Walden Pond. Although it seems to be an autobiography, *Walden* is rather a collection of meditations on relationship of man and nature or individualism:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

Thoreau's method of retreat resembles Asian meditation techniques, as he was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. His eclectic style alludes to Greek and Latin classics and is richly metaphorical.

In *Walden*, Thoreau applies to practical life the theories of Transcendentalism. Walden inspired William Butler Yeats, an Irish patriotic poet, to write "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," while Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," influenced Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement and Martin Luther King's struggle within the Civil Rights Movement.

Thoreau is the most influential of the Transcendentalists today because of his ecological concerns, emphasis on independence and political theory of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance.

MARGARET FULLER (1810-1850) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was interested in German Romantic literature, especially Goethe, whom she translated. After her father died, she started teaching at a controversial Temple School in Boston. After she met Emerson, they collaborated on the transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*. She was interested in women rights, abolitionism and social reform. In 1844 she started writing book reviews and essays on social issues such as the treatment of women prisoners and the insane. She collected some of her essays in the collection *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846) and became the first professional woman journalist in America. A year earlier, she had her most significant book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. It originally had appeared in the Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, which she edited from 1840 to 1842.

In 1846 she left for Europe where she married an Italian nobleman fighting for the Republicans. As the situation was not stable and they had a small child, they returned to America, yet the ship sank during a storm at American shore. The whole family died.

Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is the earliest American reflection of women's role in society. Fuller argued that "there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman," yet she accepted the notion of separate spheres and merely wanted them to be considered equal. Applying the democratic and Transcendental principles, Fuller analyzes the causes and consequences of sexual discrimination. She stresses the importance of "self-dependence," which women lack because "they are taught to learn their rule from without, not to unfold it from within." Fuller is finally not a feminist so much as an activist and reformer dedicated to the cause of creative human freedom and dignity for all.

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