Defining Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism in America. A philosophical and literary movement, centered in Concord and Boston, which was prominent in the intellectual and cultural life of New England from 1836 until just before the Civil War. It was inaugurated in 1836 by a Unitarian discussion group that came to be called the **Transcendental Club**. In the seven years or so that the group met at various houses, it included at one time or another Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Frederick Henry Hedge, W. E. Channing and W. H. Channing, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, George Ripley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Thoreau, and Jones Very. A quarterly periodical *The Dial* (1840-44) printed many of the early essays, poems, and reviews by the Transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism was neither a systematic nor a sharply definable philosophy, but rather an intellectual mode and emotional mood that was expressed by diverse, and in some instances rather eccentric, voices. Modern historians of the movement tend to take as its central exponents Emerson (especially in *Nature*, "The American Scholar," the Divinity School Address, "The Over-Soul," and "Self Reliance") and Thoreau (especially in *Walden* and his journals). The term "transcendental," as Emerson pointed out in his lecture "The Transcendentalist" (1841), was taken from Immanuel Kant the German philosopher (1724-1804). Kant had confined the expression "transcendental knowledge" to the cognizance of those forms and categories—such as space, time, quantity, causality—which, in his view, are imposed on whatever we perceive by the constitution of the human mind; he regarded these aspects as the universal conditions of all sense-experience. Emerson and others, however, extended the concept of transcendental knowledge, in a way whose validity Kant had specifically denied, to include an intuitive cognizance of moral and other truths that transcend the limits of sense-experience. The intellectual antecedents of American Transcendentalism, in addition to Kant, were many and diverse, and included post-Kantian German Idealists, the English thinkers Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle (themselves exponents of forms of German Idealism), Plato and Neoplatonists, the occult Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, and some varieties of Asian philosophy.

What the various Transcendentalists had in common was less what they proposed than what they were reacting against. By and large, they were opposed to rigid rationalism; to eighteenth-century empirical philosophy of the school of John Locke, which derived all knowledge from sense impressions; to highly formalized religion, especially the Calvinist orthodoxy of New England; and to the social conformity, materialism, and commercialism that they found increasingly dominant in American life. Among the counter-views that were affirmed by Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, were confidence in the validity of a mode of knowledge that is grounded in feeling and intuition, and a consequent tendency to accept what, to logical reasoning, might seem contradictions; an ethics of individualism that stressed self-trust, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency; a turn away from modern society, with its getting and spending, to the scenes and objects of the natural world, which were regarded both as physical entities and as correspondences to aspects of the human spirit (see *correspondences*); and, in place of a formal or doctrinal religion, a faith in a divine "Principle," or "Spirit," or "Soul" (Emerson's "Over-Soul") in which both humanity and the cosmos participate. This omnipresent Spirit, Emerson said, constitutes the "Unity within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other"; it manifests itself to human consciousness as influxes of inspired insights; and it is the source of the profoundest truths and the necessary condition of all moral and spiritual development.

Walden (1854) records how Thoreau tested his distinctive and radically individualist version of Transcendental values by withdrawing from societal complexities and distractions to a life of solitude and self-reliance in a natural setting at Walden Pond. He simplified his material wants to those he could satisfy by the bounty of the woods and lake or could provide by his own labor, attended minutely to natural objects both for their inherent interest and as correlatives to the mind of the observer, and devoted his leisure to reading, meditation, and writing. In his nonconformity to any social and legal requirements that violated his moral sense, he chose a day in jail rather than pay his poll tax to a government that supported the Mexican War and slavery. Brook Farm, on the other hand, was a short-lived experiment (1841-47) by more community-oriented Transcendentalists who established a commune on the professed principle of the equal sharing of work, pay, and cultural benefits. Hawthorne, who lived there for a while, later wrote about Brook Farm, with considerable skepticism about both its goals and practices, in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

The Transcendental movement, with its optimism about the indwelling divinity, self-sufficiency, and high potentialities of human nature, did not survive the crisis of the Civil War and its aftermath; and Herman Melville, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, satirized aspects of Transcendentalism in his fiction. Some of its basic concepts and values, however, were assimilated by Walt Whitman, were later echoed in writings by Henry James and other major American authors, and continue to re-emerge, in both liberal and radical modes, in latter-day America. The voice of

Thoreau, for example, however distorted, can be recognized still in some doctrines of the *counterculture* of the 1960s and later.

See *periods of American literature,* and refer to F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941); the anthology edited, together with commentary, by Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists* (1950); Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (1966); Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (1973). For a collection of writings on transcendentalism, see Perry Miller, ed., *Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (1971), and Joel Myerson, ed., *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (2000). See also *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism,* ed. Wesley T. Mott (1996).
(Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 8th ed. Boston: Thomson/Wadsworth. 2005. 335-337)

from the entry on **Symbolist Movement**
Baudelaire based the symbolic mode of his poems on the example of the American Edgar Allan Poe, but especially on the ancient belief in **correspondences**—the doctrine that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the material and spiritual worlds. As Baudelaire put this doctrine: "Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural* world, is significative, reciprocal, converse, *correspondent.*" (322)

Correspondences

All things in nature are beautiful types to the soul that can read them;
Nothing exists upon earth, but for unspeakable ends,
Every object that speaks to the senses was meant for the spirit;
Nature is but a scroll; God's handwriting thereon.
Ages ago when man was pure, ere the flood overwhelmed him,
While in the image of God every soul yet lived,
Every thing stood as a letter or word of a language familiar,
Telling of truths which now only the angels can read.
Lost to man was the key of those sacred hieroglyphics,
Stolen away by sin, till by heaven restored.
Now with infinite pains we here and there spell out a letter,
Here and there will the sense feebly shine through the dark.
When we perceive the light that breaks through the visible symbol,
What exultation is ours! We the discovery have made!
Yet is the meaning the same as when Adam lived sinless in Eden,
Only long hidden it slept, and now again is revealed.
Man unconsciously uses figures of speech every moment,
Little dreaming the cause why to such terms he is prone,
Little dreaming that every thing here has its own correspondence
Folded within its form, as in the body the soul.
Gleams of the mystery fall on us still, though much is forgotten,
And through our commonest speech, illumine the path of our thoughts.

Thus doth the lordly sun shine forth a type of the Godhead;
Wisdom and love the beams that stream on a darkened world.
Thus do the sparkling waters flow, giving joy to the desert,
And the fountain of life opens itself to the thirst.
Thus doth the word of God distil like the rain and the dew-drops;
Thus doth the warm wind breathe like to the Spirit of God;
And the green grass and the flowers are signs of the regeneration.

O thou Spirit of Truth, visit our minds once more,
Give us to read in letters of fight the language celestial --
Written all over the earth, written all over the sky--
Thus may we bring our hearts once more to know our Creator,
Seeing in all things around, types of the Infinite Mind.

Christopher Pearse Cranch *(1813-1892)*