

## TRANSCENDENTALISM

Important members of the Transcendentalist movement:

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82): *Nature* (1836); "The American Scholar" (1837)

Henry David Thoreau (1817-62): *Walden* (1854)

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1888)

George Ripley (1802-80): founder of Brook Farm (1841-47)

Margaret Fuller (1810-50): *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845)

Theodore Parker (1810-60)

Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803-76)

Official organ of the Transcendentalist movement: *The Dial* (1840-44)

Important influences on Transcendentalism:

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)

Important literary works inspired by the Transcendentalist movement: *Leaves of Grass* (1855) by Walt Whitman (1819-92); *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

From Paul P. Reuben, "A brief introduction to Transcendentalism"

### **Basic Assumption:**

The intuitive faculty is the means for a conscious union of the individual psyche with the world psyche also known as the Oversoul, life-force, prime mover and God.

### **Basic Premises:**

1. An individual is the spiritual center of the universe - and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself.
2. The structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self - all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. This is similar to Aristotle's dictum "know thyself."
3. Transcendentalists accepted the neo-Platonic conception of nature as a living mystery, full of signs - nature is symbolic.
4. The belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization - this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies:
  - a. the expansive or self-transcending tendency - a desire to embrace the whole world - to know and become one with the world.
  - b. the contracting or self-asserting tendency - the desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate - a self-centered existence.

### **Correspondence**

It is a concept which suggests that the external is united with the internal. Physical or material nature is neutral or indifferent or objective; it is neither helpful nor hurtful; it is neither beautiful nor ugly. What makes one give such attributes to nature is that individual's imposition of her/his temperament or mood or psyche. If I'm feeling lousy, I may dismiss a gorgeous day; if I'm feeling bright and cheerful then the most dreary of days becomes tolerable. And so, the Transcendentalists believed that "knowing yourself" and "studying nature" is the same activity. Nature mirrors our psyche. If I cannot understand myself, may be understanding nature will help.

### **Transcendentalism and the American Past**

Transcendentalism as a movement is rooted in the American past: To Puritanism it owed its pervasive morality and the "doctrine of divine light." It is also similar to the Quaker "inner light." However, both these concepts assume acts of God, whereas intuition is an act of an individual. In Unitarianism, deity was reduced to a kind of immanent principle in every person - an individual was the true source of moral light. To Romanticism it owed the concept of nature as a living mystery and not a clockwork universe (deism) which is fixed and permanent.

Transcendentalism was a 1. spiritual, 2. philosophical and 3. literary movement and is located in the history of American Thought as

- (a). Post-Unitarian and free thinking in religious spirituality
- (b). Kantian and idealistic in philosophy
- (c). Romantic and individualistic in literature.

#### **A Brief Chronology of Events**

1832 Emerson resigns the ministry of the Unitarian Church.

1836 The *annus mirabilis* of the movement, during which Emerson published *Nature* (the "gospel" of transcendentalism); George Ripley published *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*; Orestes Brownson published *New Views of Christianity, Society, and Church*; Bronson Alcott published *Record of Conversions in the Gospel*; the Transcendental Club, also known as Hedge's Club, met for the first time.

1837 Emerson delivers his lecture on "The American Scholar" at Harvard, which James Russell Lowell called "an event without former parallel in our literary annals."

1840 The founding of the *Dial*, a Transcendental magazine

1841 The launching of George Ripley's Brook Farm - a utopian experiment. Hawthorne was a resident there for a short time and wrote *The Blithedale Romance* based upon his experience there.

1845 Thoreau goes to live at Walden Pond.

1850 Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. The Transcendentalists found themselves increasingly involved in abolition of slavery.

1855 Walt Whitman publishes his *Leaves of Grass*.

1862 Henry David Thoreau dies.