

## OVERVIEW - TRANSCENDENTALISM

**Transcendentalism** is a philosophical movement that developed in the 1830s and 1840s in the New England region of the United States as a protest to the general state of culture and society, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard University and the doctrine of the Unitarian church taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among the transcendentalists' core beliefs was the inherent goodness of both man and nature. Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions - particularly organized religion and political parties - ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that man is at his best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

The major figures in the movement were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Margaret Fuller, and Amos Bronson Alcott. Other prominent transcendentalists included Charles Timothy Brooks, Orestes Brownson, William Ellery Channing, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Walt Whitman, John Sullivan Dwight, Convers Francis, William Henry Furness, Frederic Henry Hedge, Sylvester Judd, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, George Ripley, Thomas Treadwell Stone, and Jones Very.

### **History**

The publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature* is usually considered the watershed moment at which transcendentalism became a major cultural movement. Emerson wrote in his speech "The American Scholar": "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; Divine Soul which also inspires all men." Emerson closed the essay by calling for a revolution in human consciousness to emerge from the brand new idealist philosophy:

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, — What is truth? and of the affections, — What is good? by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. ... Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its

great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit.

In the same year, transcendentalism became a coherent movement with the founding of the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1836, by prominent New England intellectuals including George Putnam (1807–1878; the Unitarian minister in Roxbury), Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Henry Hedge.

From 1840, the group published frequently in their journal *The Dial*, along with other venues. Early in the movement's history, the term "Transcendentalists" was used as a pejorative term by critics, who were suggesting their position was beyond sanity and reason.

The transcendentalists varied in their interpretations of the practical aims of will. Some among the group linked it with utopian social change; Brownson connected it with early socialism, while others considered it an exclusively individualist and idealist project. Emerson believed the latter. In his 1842 lecture "The Transcendentalist", Emerson suggested that the goal of a purely transcendental outlook on life was impossible to attain in practice:

"You will see by this sketch that there is no such thing as a transcendental *party*; that there is no pure transcendentalist; that we know of no one but prophets and heralds of such a philosophy; that all who by strong bias of nature have leaned to the spiritual side in doctrine, have stopped short of their goal. We have had many harbingers and forerunners; but of a purely spiritual life, history has afforded no example. "

"I mean, we have yet no man who has leaned entirely on his character, and eaten angels' food; who, trusting to his sentiments, found life made of miracles; who, working for universal aims, found himself fed, he knew not how; clothed, sheltered, and weaponed, he knew not how, and yet it was done by his own hands. ..."

"Shall we say, then, that transcendentalism is the Saturnalia or excess of Faith;

the presentiment of a faith proper to man in his integrity, excessive only when his imperfect obedience hinders the satisfaction of his wish.”

By the late 1840s, Emerson believed the movement was dying out, and even more so after the death of Margaret Fuller in 1850. "All that can be said", Emerson wrote, "is, that she represents an interesting hour and group in American cultivation".

There was, however, a second wave of transcendentalists, including Moncure Conway, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Samuel Longfellow and Franklin Benjamin Sanborn. Notably, the transgression of the spirit, most often evoked by the poet's prosaic voice is said to endow in the reader a sense of purposefulness. This is the underlying theme in the majority of transcendentalist essays and papers--all of which are centered around subjects which assert a love for individual expression.

### **Origins**

Transcendentalism was in many aspects the first notable American intellectual movement. It certainly was the first to inspire succeeding generations of American intellectuals, as well as a number of literary monuments.[6] Rooted in the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (and of German Idealism more generally), it developed as a reaction against 18th Century rationalism, John Locke's philosophy of Sensualism, and the manifest destiny of New England Calvinism.

Its fundamental belief was in the unity and immanence of God in the world. The Transcendentalists found inspiration for their philosophy in a variety of diverse sources such as: Vedic thought, various religions, and German idealism.[]

The transcendentalists desired to ground their religion and philosophy in transcendental principles: principles not based on, or falsifiable by, physical experience, but deriving from the inner spiritual or mental essence of the human. Immanuel Kant had called "all knowledge transcendental which is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects." The transcendentalists were

largely unacquainted with German philosophy in the original, and relied primarily on the writings of Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Victor Cousin, Germaine de Staël, and other English and French commentators for their knowledge of it.

In contrast, they were intimately familiar with the English Romantics, and the transcendental movement may be partially described as a slightly later, American outgrowth of Romanticism. Another major influence was the mystical spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg.

Thoreau in *Walden* spoke of the Transcendentalists' debt to Vedic thought directly.

“In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.”

### **Criticism**

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a novel, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), satirizing the movement, and based it on his experiences at Brook Farm, a short-lived utopian community founded on transcendental principles. Edgar Allan Poe wrote a story, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head", in which he embedded elements of

deep dislike for transcendentalism, calling its followers "Frogpondians" after the pond on Boston Common. The narrator ridiculed their writings by calling them "metaphor-run" lapsing into "mysticism for mysticism's sake". and called it a "disease". The story specifically mentions the movement and its flagship journal *The Dial*, though Poe denied that he had any specific targets.

In Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" he offers criticism denouncing "the excess of the suggested meaning. . .which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists."

### **Influence on other movements**

*Further information: History of New Thought*

Transcendentalists were strong believers in the power of the individual and divine messages. Their beliefs are closely linked with those of the Romantics.

The movement directly influenced the growing movement of "Mental Sciences" of the mid-19th century, which would later become known as the New Thought movement. New Thought draws directly from the transcendentalists, particularly Emerson. New Thought considers Emerson its intellectual father. Emma Curtis Hopkins "the teacher of teachers"; Ernest Holmes, founder of Religious Science; the Fillmores, founders of Unity; and Malinda Cramer and Nona L. Brooks, the founders of Divine Science; were all greatly influenced by Transcendentalism.