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Transcendentalism Was a Philosophical, Literary, Social and Theological Movement

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Abstract

Around 1836 in reaction to rationalism, in New England an idealistic, philosophical and social movement called Transcendentalism was developed. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. It was also defined as a system developed by Immanuel Kant, based on the idea that, in order to understand the nature of reality, one must first examine and analyze the reasoning process that governs the nature of experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures. Transcendentalism was closely related to Unitarianism, the dominant religious movement in Boston in the early nineteenth century. It started to develop in the aftermath of Unitarianism taking hold at Harvard University. Rather than as a rejection of Unitarianism, Transcendentalism evolved as an organic consequence of the Unitarian emphasis on free conscience and the value of intellectual reason. In alternate terms, Transcendentalism was not born as a counter-movement to Unitarianism, but, as a parallel movement to the very ideas introduced by the Unitarians. By the late 1840s, Emerson believed the movement was dying out, and even more so after the death of Margaret Fuller in 1850. 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, was said to endow in the reader a sense of purposefulness. This was the underlying theme in the majority of transcendentalist essays and papers—all of which were centered on subjects which asserted a love for individual expression. Though the group was comprised of struggling aesthetes, the wealthiest among them was Samuel Gray Ward.

Introduction: The Transcendentalists could be understood by their context i.e. by what they were rebelling against, what they saw in the current situation and therefore they were trying to be different. One way to look at the Transcendentalists was to see them as a generation of well educated people who lived in the decades before the American Civil War and the national division that it reflected and helped to create a whole new nation. These

people, mostly New Englanders, around Boston, were attempting to create a unique American body of literature. It was decades since the Americans had won independence from England. Now, these people believed, it was time for literary independence. Hence, they deliberately went about creating literature, essays, novels, philosophy, poetry, and other writing that were clearly different from England, France, Germany, or any other European nation. Transcendentalists were a group of people struggling to define spirituality and religion in a way that took into account the new understandings of their age. The new Biblical Criticism in Germany and elsewhere were looking at the Christian and Jewish scriptures through the eyes of literary analysis and had raised questions for some about the old assumptions of religion. The Enlightenment had come to new rational conclusions about the natural world, mostly based on experimentation and logical thinking. The pendulum was swinging, and a more Romantic way of thinking -- less rational, more intuitive, more in touch with the senses -- was coming into vogue. German philosopher Kant raised both questions and insights into the religious and philosophical thinking about reason and religion. The new generation looked at the previous generation's rebellions of the early 19th century Unitarians and Universalists against traditional Trinitarianism and against Calvinist predestinationarianism. The new generation decided that the revolutions had not gone far enough, and had stayed too much in the rational mode. Emerson called the previous generation of rational religion as "Corpse-cold". The spiritual hunger of the age had given rise to a new evangelical Christianity in the educated centres in New England and around Boston, to an intuitive, experiential, passionate, more-than-just-rational perspective. God gave humankind the gift of intuition, the gift of insight, the gift of inspiration. Added to all this, the scriptures of non-Western cultures were discovered in the West, translated, and published so that they were more widely available. Emerson and others began to read Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, and examine their own religious assumptions against these scriptures. In their perspective, a loving God would not have led so much of humanity astray; there must be truth in these scriptures, too. Truth, if it agreed with an individual's intuition of truth, must be indeed truth. As a result; Transcendentalism was born. The Transcendentalists became involved in social reform movements, especially anti-slavery and women's rights. The Transcendentalists, despite some remaining Euro-chauvinism in thinking that people with British and German backgrounds were more suited for freedom than others believed that at the level of the human soul, all people had access to divine inspiration, sought, loved freedom, knowledge and truth. Hence, institutions of society which fostered vast differences in the ability to be educated, to be self-directed, were institutions to be reformed. Women and African-descended slaves were human beings who deserved more ability to become educated, to fulfil their human potential, to be fully human. Men like Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson who identified themselves as Transcendentalists, also worked for freedom of the slaves and for women's freedom.

Transcendentalism legacy in literature: The Transcendental Movement dramatically shaped the direction of American literature, although perhaps not in the ways its adherents

had imagined. Many writers were and still are inspired and taught by Emerson and Thoreau in particular, and struck out in new directions because of the literary and philosophical lessons they had learned. Walt Whitman was not the only writer to claim that he was "simmering, simmering, and simmering "until reading Emerson brought him" to a boil." Emily Dickinson's poetic direction was quite different, but she too was a thoughtful reader of Emerson and Fuller. In his own way, even Frederick Douglass incorporated many lessons of transcendental thought from Emerson.

Other writers worked towards realism and "anti-transcendentalism" or what Michael Hoffman called "negative Romanticism"; Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville found extraordinary creative ways to object many aspects of their transcendental contemporaries, as they incorporated others. Few American writers have been completely free of the influence of Emerson and Thoreau, whether in reaction or imitation.

Books could and have been written on this subject, and this was only an introduction. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of transcendental ideas and form today was the developing genre of nature writing. With its roots firmly in a world-view adapted from Emerson's *Nature* and the literary inspiration of Thoreau's *Walden* in particular, this interdisciplinary yet literary genre had evolved under the pens of numerous writers, from John Muir and John Burroughs to writers as diverse as Annie Dillard, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, Ed Abbey, Gary Snyder, Barbara Kingsolver--and the list expands every year.

Legacy of Transcendentalism: Religion and Philosophy: Christians believe that both the world and the individual soul must be made fit for divinity. The numerous branches, sects, or types of Christianity make sweeping generalizations about possible solutions most difficult, especially when nearly Christianity takes seriously the authority of the individual's conscience and, to some degree, personal interpretation of Scripture. Many Christians perceive a mandate to return to Eden as it is humanly possible. Some Christians view this in a quite literal sense: they believe that the New Testament clearly states that there will be a Second Coming of Christ, such that our world and our souls will be the actual hosts of a visible God. As Peter Gomes relates their vision, the main message of the Old Testament was that God had agreed to "dwell among and bless his people, but only if they followed his commandments and respected his demands." Other sects interpreted the commanded preparation for the Second Coming as metaphor: it spoke of the personal preparation one had to undergo in order to withstand the powerful spiritual impact of God coming into one's heart.

Until recently, the concept of reparation--and preparation--had been confined to the idea of cultivation and rendering Nature "useful." The surge of Christian environmental awareness over the last few decades--for which Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was catalyst--cast "preparation" in a new light: Perhaps the world *is*, as was the Garden, already "prepared" for divinity--*but for the damage we have done*. As Emerson had said that

"Particular natural facts were symbols of particular spiritual facts, Nature was the symbol of the spirit". The spiritual perfection Gomes cited as necessary for the Christian soul's salvation would be reflected in the state of the natural world. In order to fulfil the possibilities of new theological thinking, Sally McFague said we will need to take this somewhat elastic logic to heart; replacing the Christian "redemption spirituality" with "creation spirituality" will not be enough by itself, but it was the starting point. She believed that on concentrating in redemption, in which each soul ultimately fended for itself, and constantly looked toward another world, we had neglected the wonders of creation--all souls sprung from a single source, all recipients of one wonderful gift, our earth. Thus to our surprise when we recognized the beautiful goodness already in Nature: it was as it should be, except, again, for the pain we humans had inflicted.

As the editors of *Spirit and Nature* noted in their introduction, "[a] theology could obstruct development of a respect for nature or foster it." Up until the middle of this century, Christianity could fairly be accused of obstruction. In early America there were two lines of thought concerning Nature. The first way of thinking saw Nature—the wilderness, more accurately—as an alien, fearful entity that must be dealt with by taming it. It was not uncommon for the wilderness to be referred to as a "desert" in early American writing. Nature was unpredictable, irrational, vaguely feminine and bad. On the other hand, the Puritans had a moral obligation to tame it. Wild nature was where we found ourselves after we were dismissed from the Garden; its chaotic state reflected our sin. It had not just little value but even a negative quality when left by itself in a "natural" state. To leave it as was would be akin to neglecting the religious education of our children.

The second line of thought, which often evolved from the first frightened outlook as time eased fear, was the attitude contained in words like "frontier" and "resource": It was somewhat ironic that "frontier" also carried an almost sensual connotation of primal freedom; "wild" was our favourite modifier for the word. But it made sense when we considered that the concept of the frontier grew as Puritanism waned. Perhaps it was not coincidence that certain changes in the Christian perception of environmental responsibility occurred around the same time that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Americans had stepped into the "final frontier" and discovered it was unlikely we would ever turn it into property. That the idea we might actually run out of room dawned upon us rather slowly made it no less a shocking realization.

Just two years before Apollo landed, Lynn White, Jr. published a severe criticism of the Judeo-Christian tradition, accused it of manufacturing deep divisions between God and man and Nature while encouraged a disrespectful exploitation of Nature. Although in 1964, the National Council of Churches had created a Faith-Man-Nature study group to explore new theological understanding of this same triad relationship, it was "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" from White which galvanized theologians across the religious spectrum into examination of historical tradition. Carson's 1962 book had awakened the theologians to the need for such scrutiny; it was hard to tell whether it was White's time of publication that made his book a beacon, or if his work and others like it were what created

such turbulent times: "eco-theology" was just one of a myriad of new social thought exploded in the late 1960s and early 70s. Like the 19th century Transcendentalists, and as do the other religious leaders who speak in these pages, McFague champions self-awareness first and then awareness of communal ties, and education is the key to this discovery; education also will encourage science, in the future to alleviate the environmental damage--rather than enable and exacerbate it, a role science has played in the past. McFague's stance is as bold as that of the early Transcendentalists who scorned "the corpse cold Unitarianism of Harvard College and Brattle Street." McFague echoed Emerson's description of changes wrought by Transcendentalism, as he lectured in the "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England:

. . .the paramount source of the religious revolution was Modern Science. . . showing mankind that the earth on which we live was not the centre of the Universe. . . . Astronomy taught us our insignificance in Nature; showed that our sacred as our profane history had been written in gross ignorance of the laws, which were far grander than we knew; and compelled a certain extension and uplifting of our views of the Deity and his Providence. This correction of our superstitions was confirmed . . . in every department. But we presently saw also that the religious nature in man was not affected by these errors in his understanding. The religious sentiment made nothing of bulk or size, or far or near; triumphed over time as well as space; and every lesson of humility, or justice, or charity. . . was still forever true. The age was moral. Every immorality is a departure from nature, and is punished by natural loss and deformity.

The Political and social legacy of Transcendentalism: Much was written on Thoreau's landmark essay on "Civil Disobedience." Indeed, it had been used as a model for modern day leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. Andrew Trask stated, "There are elements of Dr. King's "direct action" of civil disobedience that we must consider: 'pure' nonviolence, pragmatic action, and, the difference between just and unjust laws." These ideas were clearly Thoreauvian in nature. Furthermore, Gandhi advocated the use of civility at all times—"the civil register," which extolled respect for the opposition and behaviour out of understanding rather than anger. Like Thoreau, Gandhi was constantly seeking the higher truth with regard to man's relationship in the universe.

Although these men were the most famous followers of Thoreau's ideals, the essay had more wide reaching political and social impact than most people understood. "In the 1940's it was read by the Danish resistance, in the 1950's it was cherished by people who opposed McCarthyism, in the 1960's it was influential in the struggle against South African apartheid, and in the 1970's it was discovered by a new generation of anti-war activists." However, it was interesting to note that not all modern day critics agreed with Thoreau's determination towards mass nonviolence. James Goodwin wrote: "Although Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., credited Thoreau as an inspiration to their mass campaigns of passive resistance, in crucial instances his thought appeared to be more closely aligned to a doctrine of individual nihilism than to the philosophy of mass nonviolence. One such

instance was contained in Thoreau's response to John Brown." In comparing Thoreau's John Brown pieces to his earlier "Civil Disobedience," Leon Edel concluded, "His defense of John Brown, with his espousal of violence, was hardly the voice of the same man... Thoreau's involvement in his cause had in it strong elements of hysteria." I thought it was important to realize that Thoreau was horrified and impassioned by the plight of John Brown and certainly the idea of slavery on a broader scale, and this feeling was obvious in his "Plea for John Brown."

Thoreau was a firm believer in autonomy, professed individual defiance of unjust laws, and a stubborn resistance to government intrusion into society. Was it not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right? Thoreau wasn't opposed to laws in general, but to those that rendered the individual incapable of functioning with a good conscience--for example, the laws in regard to slavery. Just because we were members of a given society doesn't mean we had to agree with the laws imposed upon us, especially if those laws were deemed inequitable. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that would be one step towards obtaining it." Other than passing laws according to mass opinion, the government should practice altruism as the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Thoreau saw a government that in his perception was often immoral, overbearing, and self-righteous.

As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau was particularly disdainful of violent acts, believed that any dispute could be resolved peaceably through reason and intellect. "Under a government which imprisoned any unjustly, the true place for a just man was also a prison." People who obeyed the tax laws in order to support the State at war were aiding injustice on many planes. "The character inherent in the American people had done all that had been accomplished, and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way." As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau advocated the character of individual men in making improvements to himself and society as a whole. In fact, the government often existed to treat virtuous citizens as criminals in order to enact the laws at hand. This institution succeeded in punishing slaves as well as Thoreau himself. He went to jail in a quiet protest of the abolitionist cause and the Mexican War. When the neighbourly tax collector confronted Thoreau about his delinquency in paying, he agreed with Thoreau's reluctance to support an unworthy cause but hauled him off to jail anyway. In order to appease the masses confounded by Thoreau's acquiescence in being detained, Thoreau detailed his explanation in a lecture presented twice in 1848. It was published in 1849 as "Resistance to Civil Government" and posthumously in 1866 as "Civil Disobedience." Why should a court of law determine whether or not a man had the right to be free, if that individual exercised his will with regard to sound mind and conscience? The law would never make men free; it was men who had got to make the law free. They were the lovers of law and order, who observed the law when the government broke it. According to Sanderson Beck: "We must learn to obey the laws of our own being which would never be in opposition to a just government. Thoreau's great innovation was in the ways he suggested for opposing an unjust government in order to be true to the higher laws of one's own

being." In today's world, Thoreau essay was time honoured. Would Thoreau roll over in his grave at the state of politics in America today?

Conclusion: According to reader response theory, Transcendentalism was a very formal word that described a simple idea. People, men and women equally, had knowledge about themselves and the world around them that "transcended" or went beyond what they could see, hear, taste, touch or feel. This knowledge came through intuition and imagination not through logic or the senses. People could trust themselves to be their own authority on what was right. A transcendentalist was a person who accepted these ideas not as religious beliefs but as a way of understanding life's relationship. The individuals most closely associated with this new way of thinking were connected loosely through a group known as The Transcendental Club, which met in the Boston home of George Ripley. Their chief publication was a periodical called "The Dial," edited by Margaret Fuller, a political radical and feminist whose book "Women of the Nineteenth Century" was among the most famous of its time. H.D. Thoreau was the most interesting character as he wanted to put transcendentalism into practice. Thoreau carried out the experiment in self-reliance when he went to Walden Pond, built a hut, and tried to live self-sufficiently without the trappings or interference of society. Later, when he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, his faith in humanity, and his sturdy individualism, Thoreau reminded everyone that life was wasted pursuing wealth and following social customs. Nature could show that "all good things were wild and free."

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