

TRANSCENDENTALISM



<http://transcendentalism-legacy.tamu.edu/>

- The Present Age (...) is said to be the age of the first person singular. (Emerson, *Journal*, 1827)

- Eclectic movement involving preachers, educators, artists, writers, intellectuals...
- Originated in the area of Boston, Massachusetts
- It may be considered as an American adaptation of European romanticism (the romantics valued intuition more than reason)

The nature of Transcendentalism

- Transcendentalist is “one who displays a predominant tendency to respect his intuitions” (Emerson)
- “What is popularly known as Transcendentalism is Idealism” (Emerson)

Chief intellectual influences

- German philosophy: Kant, Hegel
- The poetic expression of European romanticism: Goethe, Novalis, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle
- Mme. De Staël (*De l'Allemagne*)

The nature of Transcendentalism

- “There is a very important class of ideas which do not come by experience, but through which experience is acquired, and these are intuitions of the mind. [...] These intuitions may be called Transcendental forms” (Kant)

Key features

A celebration of individualism and the importance of the self

A celebration of intuition

A marked tendency towards introspection

A veneration of nature

It seemed tailor-made for an emerging democracy that had its basis on the Enlightenment

Transcendentalism

- Emerged as a protest against the state of culture and society in general (social hypocrisy, cultural philistinism, question of slavery, treatment to Indians...)
- and against the Unitarian Churches (no empirical proof of religion could be satisfactory)
 - “We have no empirical experience of a Creator” (Emerson)

Unitarians

Authority of the Bible
God above man
God of grace and punishment
Man marred by original sin
Predestination
God transcending nature
Division between body and soul
Nature as satanic temptation
Sermons, didactic prose

Transcendentalists

No authority external to the individual
God within man
God of mystery and wonder
Goodness of human nature
Man is master of his destiny
All matter contains spirit
No dichotomy or division between body and soul
Nature as a teacher and inspiration
Poetry, prose of insight

Interest in utopian experiments

- The Brook Farm community (The Brook Farm Institute for Agriculture and Education)
- Founded by George Ripley in 1841:
- “The City of God, anew”
- “The purpose of Christianity is to redeem society as well as the individual from sin”.
- This entailed a community based on respect, equality, dignity and education



Brook Farm

- Based on balancing labor and leisure
"to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual" (Ripley).
- Influence of the French socialist Charles Fourier, who had started an experiment in community living: "the Phalanx"
- Building burnt down in March 1846, uninsured

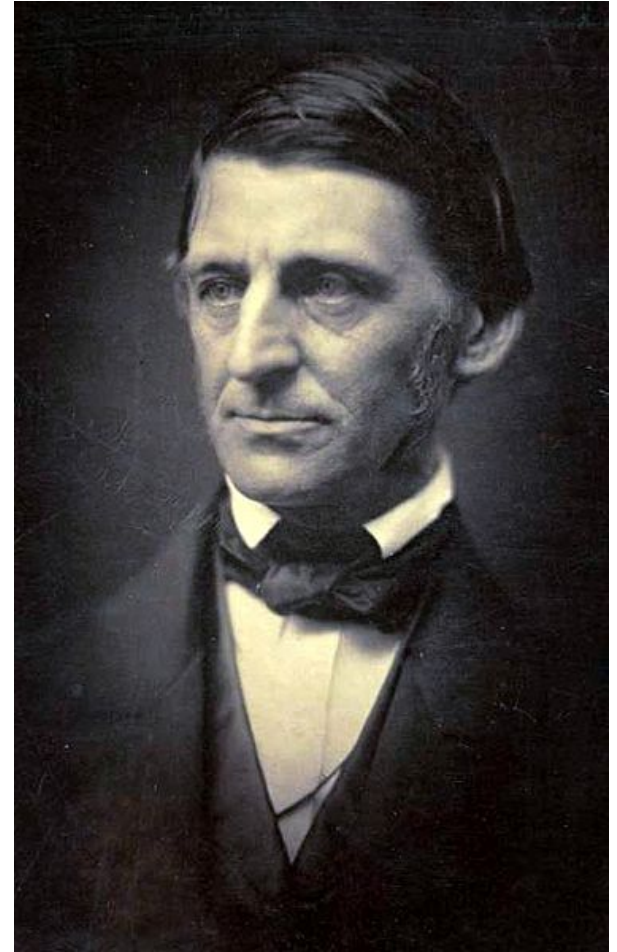
Prominent Transcendentalists

- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Henry David Thoreau
- Ellery Channing
- Amos Bronson Alcott
- George Ripley
- Theodor Parker
- Margaret Fuller

Emerson (1803-82)

Life:

- Born in Boston, the son of a Unitarian minister; after his father's death he was raised by his mother and aunt
- Attended Harvard; joined the Unitarian church and then resigned
- Trip to Europe, where he met Carlyle, Coleridge, Wordsworth
- Moved to Concord, where he became the spokesman of Transcendentalism, a prescient critic and a champion of individualism



Influential writings

- “Nature” (1836): First essay in which he formulated his transcendentalist ideas (“all things are connected to God and, therefore, all things are divine”)
- “Self-Reliance” (1836)
- “The American Scholar” (1837), considered the American intellectual “declaration of independence”

Bibliography

Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader*,
Oxford UP, 2000

Links:

<http://transcendentalism-legacy.tamu.edu/>

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/transcendentalism/>