

Backgrounds of American Literary Thought

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Rod W. Horton

Colorado Women's College

Herbert W. Edwards

New York University

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II. TRANSCENDENTALISM: THEORY AND PRACTICE

While transcendentalism was in many ways peculiar to New England, it can perhaps be best understood as a somewhat late and localized manifestation of the European romantic movement. The triumph of feeling and intuition over reason, the exaltation of the individual over society, the impatience at any kind of restraint or bondage to custom, the new and thrilling delight in nature—all these were in some measure characteristic of the American counterpart of the movement of which Wordsworth and Coleridge were the center in England and which inspired German idealist philosophy in Europe. In New England, however, romanticism assumed a predominantly moral and philosophical tone, the former having its foundations in the persistence of Puritan idealism, the latter springing largely from the writings and personality of Emerson.

But to call transcendentalism a philosophy is to ascribe to it a logical consistency which it never achieved, even in the mind of its chief spokesman. The three sources most readily discernible are neo-Platonism, German idealist philosophy, and certain Eastern mystical writings which were introduced into the Boston area in the early nineteenth century. From the first comes the belief in the importance of spirit over matter, and an ascending hierarchy of spiritual values rising to absolute Good, Truth, and Beauty. From the second, transmitted chiefly through the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle, came the emphasis on intuition as opposed to intellect as a means of piercing to the real essence of things; while the last, lifted bodily out of an entirely alien culture and civilization, contributed a kind of fuzzy mysticism that helped to bridge over the weak spots in a tenuous and unsystematic philosophy.

Though these diverse elements are identifiable in transcendentalism, its most distinguishing characteristic is undoubtedly its underlying relationship to the romantic

movement as a whole. The transcendentalists insisted on a complete break with tradition and custom, encouraged individualism and self-reliance, and rejected a too-intellectual approach to life. To young people in Concord, Massachusetts in the first decades of the nineteenth century, spiritually starved in the vacuum left by the decline of the original Puritan zeal, the emotional fervor and the high idealism of the romantics were like a great new force in their lives. The west wind had indeed driven Shelley's thoughts over the universe, and nowhere did they more truly quicken a new birth than in Concord.

But Concord had once been Puritan, and the impress of Puritanism was always deep and lasting. Transcendentalism, by the very nature of its environment, could not plunge into the atheistical radicalism of a Shelley, nor sink into the melancholy remoteness of a Keats. As formulated by Emerson it became a trumpet call to action, exhorting young men to slough off their deadening enslavement to the past, to follow the God within, and to live every moment of life with a strenuousness that rivalled that of the Puritan fathers. At the same time he insisted on the moral nature of the universe, and pointed to nature as the great object lesson proving God's presence everywhere in his creation. It would not be far wrong to say that transcendentalism was Calvinism modified by the assumption of the innate goodness of man.

Thus the pervading tone of moral earnestness in transcendentalism is relatively easily traced. Other elements, its idealist monism, its optimism, its rejection of any Christian orthodoxy, and its denial of the reality of evil are less readily accounted for. Professor Christy identifies three components as making up the Orientalism referred to above as the third source of transcendentalist thought: Hindu Vedantism, Confucianism, and Islamic Sufi religious poetry.¹ However,

¹ Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, Columbia University Press, 1932, Chapters XI-XII.

Emerson, like all of his fellow transcendentalists, was highly eclectic in his selection of elements from each body of thought; further, he incorporated into his personal version of transcendentalism only those parts which were most congenial to his optimistic but rather austere temperament. Thus he ignored the latent pessimism in the Hindu belief in the transmigration of souls; the pragmatic, earth-bound origin of the ethics of Confucianism; the mutual incompatibility of the Hindu concept of Karma (the belief that our actions in one incarnation affect the quality of our life in the succeeding one) and the Muslim concept of Kismet (the fate irrevocably decreed in the Book of Allah for every individual); and the erotic symbolism pervading much of Sufi religious poetry.

Of the three Oriental influences cited by Christy, the most important for Emerson was Vedantic mysticism. References to Indian religious thought occur in his *Journals* as early as 1820, when Emerson was only seventeen. His favorite of all Vedantic writings was the *Bhagavadgita*, which he reread and loaned to his friends until it was worn out.² However, because of Emerson's arbitrary and sometimes inconsistent use of his sources, it is possible to identify here only the most important areas in which his thought parallels that of the Vedantic system.³

For example, the monism of Emerson's concept of the Oversoul begins in the romantic neo-Platonic belief in the existence of unchanging ideal forms;⁴ but finally resembles

² Ralph L. Rusk notes that Emerson's regard for the "sacredness" of this text was so extreme that he would not sponsor an American edition "to offer to unprepared readers." (*The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949, p. 371.)

³ "A metaphysical system in which reality is conceived as a unified whole." (*American Heritage Dictionary*, Houghton Mifflin, 1969.)

⁴ Hence the philosophical term *idealism*, a system of belief which holds that all physical objects are but imperfect copies of metaphysical archetypes or patterns. The moralistic connotations of the term derive nat-

much more closely the Vedantic concept of Brahman,⁵ or, as when associated with the term *atman* (soul),⁶ the Brahman-Atman, "the pantheistic world soul which informs Hinduism as a whole, and particularly its more intellectual expressions."⁷ When we consider that "in one of the philosophic schools of Hinduism it was through knowledge of the identity of the individual self with Brahman-Atman that *moksha* (salvation) was attained,"⁸ we find that, with the exception of its moral idealism, we have accounted for the major characteristics of Emerson's concept of the Oversoul.

Turning now to a brief consideration of Emerson's life, we see that his career is consistent with the high principles he enunciated, although his influence was to be felt in the realm of ideas rather than in overt action. Born in 1803 in Boston, the son of a clergyman, he was trained for the ministry, and lived a life that was outwardly uneventful. His one dramatic and decisive action was his resigning in 1831 his Unitarian pastorate at the Second Church because of scruples of conscience over praying in public and because of his inability to believe in the sacramental significance of the

urally from the implication that the ideal is necessarily "better than" the actual, and therefore the more ardently to be sought after.

⁵ Emerson incorrectly uses the term *Brahma*, which denominated specifically "the creator god, the least of the great Hindu trimurti, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva." "Brahman, signifying only prayer or the prayer spell in the Rig-Veda [one of the four earliest bodies of Vedantic writings] came to represent the power behind that spell and finally in the *Upanishads* it came to stand for the ultimate world-ground or reality. Brahman is absolute, impersonal, and ultimately indescribable, 'neti neti,' 'not that, not that,' as one of the *Upanishads* declares." (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Virgilius Ferm [The Philosophical Library, 1945], p. 87.)

⁶ Originally "wind, breath, nature of a thing." "In the late Brahmanas (after 600 B.C.), or Hindu priestly writings, it came to signify 'the self,' and, in the *Upanishads*, the universal self; also, cosmic mind, cosmic consciousness, world soul: a unit in the cosmic aggregate of souls (*purusha*)." (*Ibid.*, p. 44.)

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Lord's Supper. He was one of those quiet men whose ideas overturn society. After a trip to Europe in 1833-35 during which he met many prominent men, including Coleridge and Carlyle, he settled in Concord, having found his spiritual bearings, and sure in the certainty of what he wanted to do. He would preach an entirely new gospel, one whose practicality would justify the concerns of everyday life, and whose idealism would contribute to an enrichment of the spirit. His message would be cheerful and optimistic, and above all would allow men to think well of themselves.

In three short essays written between 1836-1838 Emerson announced what this message would be. In *Nature* (1836) he showed how man discovers his spiritual nature and goes on to explore the ever-ascending realms of the universe to the ultimate reality of Spirit. In *The American Scholar* (Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard College, 1837), he showed how the nation as a whole could achieve independence from European literary traditions, and told of the part that scholars, philosophers and men of letters could play in developing self-reliant nationhood. In the next year he delivered the controversial *Divinity School Address* at Cambridge in which he shocked the faculty and orthodox clergy by urging his youthful audience to cease thoughtless repetition of traditional creeds and dogmas and to become "newborn bards of the Holy Ghost," drawing upon personal experience and immediate intuition for the means with which to persuade their hearers.

Thus we see echoed William Ellery Channing's belief that man, because he is the creature of God, necessarily partakes of the divine nature of his creator. But Emerson's philosophical temperament could not allow him to accept even such a mild theological explanation of the universe. By 1841 he was ready to announce his own conception of the Oversoul and its operation in the world. Drawing arbitrarily upon the variety of religious and philosophical sources suggested

above, he conceived of an all-pervading unitary spiritual power from which all things emanate, and from which man derives the divine spark of his inner being. Since the Oversoul is by definition good, it follows that the universe is necessarily moral. Nature is the new Bible wherein man may see a thousand times in a day fresh evidences of the harmony and rightness of the world, and to which he may turn to renew his spirit. If he will but follow the promptings of his innermost feelings, man will not only discover his true course in life, but he will find that literally inexhaustible powers may be drawn upon to help him achieve his goals.

Two corollaries follow from these premises. Since the Oversoul is a single essence, and since all men derive their being from the same source, the seeming diversity and clash of human interests is only superficial, and all mankind is in reality striving toward the same ends by different but converging paths. Thus is affirmed the universal brotherhood of man, and the ultimate resolution of all social problems. The harder each man strives to express his individuality, and the more faithfully he follows the inner voice, the more surely will the aims of his life coincide with those of his neighbor.

The second corollary is developed most fully in *Compensation*, published in 1841. In this essay Emerson drew the startling conclusion that if the Oversoul is all powerful and at the same time good, then evil does not exist. With one stroke he cut the Gordian knot that had resisted the logic of philosophers and theologians since the dawns of man's speculations about the nature of the universe and the problem of evil: it is negative, the opposite of good, and as such is powerless to effect anything, either in this world or the next. All temporary unbalance is redressed by "compensation"—that is, every "evil" deed is offset by a corresponding "good" one, and every apparent "gain" carries with it the price tag of a corresponding "loss." Nor is this adjustment

of the balance deferred to the uncertainties of the life beyond the grave. Though the individual man may not see within his own experience the full working out of this principle, nevertheless the lines of force in the universe flow forever in the direction of the good, and ultimately shape all things to their benign will. Thus the thief steals only from himself, the man in high office suffers from the care and calumny that accompany his position, and even sorrow and bereavement have their compensating factor in the deepening of the character of the one undergoing these trials.

To support this theory Emerson drew heavily upon his view of nature as exhibiting a constant unity-in-dualism. As a leaf has two sides and yet is one leaf; as heat has its opposite cold, and yet both are manifestations of the same form of energy; as every form of living matter conforms to the dualism of male and female and yet derives from the same unified substance, so every act or occurrence must have its counterpart somewhere in the universe. To the obvious objection that such a view of morality would lead either to fatalism or complete irresponsibility, Emerson replied that man's highest duty is to demonstrate by the fulness and goodness of his daily life the beauty and perfection of the Oversoul, and that to fail to do so was simply to negate oneself. And against those wicked ones who wilfully persisted in negating themselves, he could always invoke his law of compensation and prove that the universe, by its very nature, will "make all things work together for good for those who love the Lord," in spite of those who do not.

In further consideration of this last point, two or three additional principles of Vedantic thought may be briefly noted. First, if Emerson had chosen to do so, he could have invoked against the evil-doers the concept of Karma, whereby the sinners' wicked deeds pursue them, like Nemesis, from incarnation to incarnation, removing them ever farther from

immersion with the ineffable One. Second, Emerson was aware of, but never directly grappled with the central paradox of his monist view of the world: if the Brahman-Atman is truly the One and the source of All, the good man and the wicked man are essentially the same spiritual entity, inseparable from each other, like Emerson's own obverse and reverse of the same leaf.⁹ Finally, the whole problem of the reality of evil is obscured in Vedantist thought by the extreme idealism implicit in the "neti, neti" concept of the Brahman. Strictly speaking, the Brahman-Atman can be described only in terms of what it is *not*, for to say that it is any one thing is to delimit its transcendence. The logical consequence, then, is that although the world of the senses is the emanation of the Brahman, it cannot be real in the sense that the Brahman is. Thus the seemingly solid, "real" world in which we live (even the bodies we inhabit) is only *Maya*, an illusion imposed upon us by the limitations of our imperfect senses. If this be true of the physical world, how can we be sure that the distinction between good and evil is any more real than the other phantasms our fallible minds conjure up?¹⁰

In his study of Transcendentalism, Professor Goddard

⁹ For the most explicit acknowledgment of this ultimate identity (but not of the paradox it presents), see Emerson's enigmatic poem "Brahma," which begins,

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

¹⁰ That Emerson was fully aware of this element of Vedantic thought is shown by his devoting an entire essay, "Illusions" (1860), to the subject. Early in the essay he says, "I find men victims of illusions in all parts of life . . . Yoganidra, the goddess of illusion, Proteus, or Momus, or Gylfi's Mocking,—for the Power has many names,—is stronger than the Titans, stronger than Apollo. Few have overheard the gods or surprised their secret"; and later, "Though the world exist from thought, thought is daunted in the presence of the world." *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Poetry and Prose*, introduction by Reginald L. Cook (Holt, Rinehart, Winston (RE 30), 1950), pp. 286, 290.

characterizes it as "first and foremost, a doctrine concerning the mind, its ways of acting and methods of getting knowledge."¹¹ In "The Transcendentalist" (1842) Emerson begins by making an absolute distinction between "the Materialists and the Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness . . ." and goes on to say that the idealist "takes his departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world an appearance."¹² Within the same paragraph, Emerson further asserts, "Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena," thus confirming his identification with the idealist school of philosophy. In such a world, only mind can respond to mind: only by refusing to be deceived by the illusory perceptions of the senses can the idealist perceive the essential reality of the spiritual universe.

Therefore, Emerson's concept of the physical world as the emanation of the creative power of an impersonal Oversoul is necessarily pantheistic. However, his constant use of the word "God" in referring to the divine life-principle would seem to indicate either that the habits of a lifetime were too strong for him, or that his actual idea of the Deity was more personalized than his philosophy should logically have permitted. In other ways, too, as we have seen, Emerson's transcendentalism retained distinguishing characteristics of Puritanism—its moral earnestness, its belief that the chief function of nature is to confirm to man the beauty and harmony of God's universe, its call to the strenuous life, and its insistence on man's obligation to glorify in his life the Power that created him. Even in his economics he resembled his forebears, for he believed that success consists in close ap-

¹¹ H. C. Goddard, *Studies in New England Transcendentalism*, Hillary House, Ltd., 1906 (reprinted 1960), p. 4.

¹² "The Transcendentalist," *The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. I, William H. Wise Company, 1929, p. 102.

pliance to the laws of the world, and since these laws are intellectual and moral, the acquisition of wealth is necessarily moral. Just as the snow falls level today and is blown into drifts tomorrow, so inevitably are riches unequally distributed among the people. Even the founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony could hardly have found a more apt analogy from nature to justify inequalities of wealth, although the rest of Emerson's "theology" would have been to them a scandal and an abomination.

But however much of the moral force of Puritanism underlay transcendentalism, the student should by now be able to distinguish some of the other strains in this hybrid pseudo-philosophy. In addition to the neo-Platonism and the Orientalism already noted, we can detect the "inner light" of the Quakers, the belief in the divine nature of man as held by the Unitarians, and more than a touch of the antinomianism of Anne Hutchinson. Transcendentalism was the answer of the Concord idealists to the growing materialism and worldliness of the United States of the 1830's and 40's, and as such it could take an uncompromising stand on a matter of principle, even if it meant, as it did in the case of Henry Thoreau, the advocacy of civil disobedience. Emerson could boast that he "unsettled everything," and Thoreau calmly went to jail for refusing to pay a tax which he knew would help defray the expenses of a war to extend slavery. Thoreau heartily concurred with the statement that "that government is best which governs least," and was equally ready to pursue the idea to its logical conclusion: "that government is best which governs not at all." So far as private morality was concerned, his view of slavery was that Massachusetts was as much responsible for its continuance as any state in the South:

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred

thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may*. (Civil Disobedience—italics Thoreau's.)

Such utterances insure a man a niche in history, but are not likely to endear him to the hearts of his contemporaries. Yankee skippers could and did read their Bibles while their human cargoes sickened and died in the filth of the hold, but to Thoreau's way of thinking their guilt was no greater than that of the northern manufacturers who took the cotton so cheaply produced, and made it into expensive cloth. Much as Henry's own townfolk might like to consider him a little "queer," there was nothing queer about the disturbing clarity with which he went straight to the heart of an issue. The law which Thoreau obeyed was an inner and higher law, and one which left no room for comfortable rationalizations.

III. TRANSCENDENTALISM AND THE PEOPLE

In summing up the contributions of transcendentalism to the moral and intellectual life of the United States, we are dealing once again with the baffling problem of the permeation of ideas throughout a body of people. Although Emerson travelled and lectured widely, there were undoubtedly many thousands of Americans of his time who lived and died without ever having heard of him. The movement centered largely in and around Boston and ran its course there, and though its effects were sharply felt in the reforms of a small but militant group of Unitarian ministers and laymen, and in the clamoring voices of a host of minor prophets and "come-outers" who formed the "lunatic fringe" of transcendentalism, it was more of a leavening of the lump than a sudden mass conversion. As a matter of fact, the leaders of the movement were too individualistic to found a school of philosophy, and until his death in 1882

Emerson stood a little aside from even the closest of his followers.

Transcendentalism was an ethical guide to life for a young nation. It appealed to the best side of human nature, confident in the divine spark in all men, and it was a clarion call to throw off the shackles of custom and tradition, and go forward to the development of a new and distinctly American culture. In its insistence on the essential worth and dignity of the individual it was a powerful force for democracy, and at the same time it preached, and practised, an idealism that was greatly needed in a rapidly expanding economy where opportunity too often became mere opportunism, and the desire to "get on" obscured the moral necessity for rising to spiritual heights.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of transcendentalism were grave. Never a systematic philosophy, it borrowed from many sources and reconciled few of them. Emerson was aware of this fact, but discounted it. "A foolish consistency," he said, "is the hobgoblin of small minds." So long as men's lives conformed to the "beautiful necessity" of the moral nature of the universe what need was there for rigidly logical systems of thought? Indeed, the great success of transcendentalism was its ability to take refuge in a bland mysticism whenever the demands of logic became too insistent.

But a more serious criticism of the movement is that, as applied by people who did not possess Emerson's purity of nature or his moral idealism, transcendentalism became a *rationale* for the pressure toward expansionism that was already turning men's minds to the conquest of the West. The injunction to "hitch your wagon to a star," coupled with Horace Greeley's "Go west, young man" resulted far more often in rampant individualism than in a democracy of mutual helpfulness and equal opportunity. Emerson's confusing of natural and moral law, and his belief in compensation as the balance wheel of the universe led just as logically

to Pope's "whatever is, is right" as to the necessity for reform, while his denial of the reality of evil tended to make moral indignation a gratuitous and irrelevant emotion.

According to such reasoning, the Black Plague in fourteenth-century England becomes a blessing in disguise because it helped break down feudalism by reducing the labor supply and enabling the peasants to demand wages in money. The institution of slavery itself could be rationalized as of inestimable benefit to the Negro race because it brought them so much the sooner into contact with white civilization and hastened the day when all racial differences will be reconciled in universal brotherhood. It is this aspect of Emersonianism that is so hard to refute by logical argument, and yet its shallow optimism makes impossible the tragic view of life and stultifies at one stroke all human suffering and anguish.

Finally, it may be said that the failure of transcendentalism as a moral force in American life was its denial of its real spiritual origins. These lay not truly in Greek or German philosophy, nor in far Eastern mysticism, but in the glowing core of Puritan religious zeal which the Unitarians of Emerson's day had apparently discarded. Outside the small Concord circle, the simple logic of the people distilled out of Emersonianism merely those elements that justified their acquisitiveness, and left it up to the principle of compensation to balance the rest of the account. Emerson himself lived long enough to see the full tide of post-Civil War exploitation and private and public corruption, but he apparently never understood that his own teachings were in part responsible. It was one thing when in 1845 Henry Thoreau took the law in his own hands; it was quite another when Jay Gould did so in 1869. But in the difference between refusing to pay a poll tax that would help to extend slavery and making \$11,000,000 on a near-corner of the gold

market lay the full measure of the possible implications in the utterances of the Sage of Concord.

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