

▶ **Transcendentalism in America**

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Abstract:

This article aims at providing a brief overview of one of the most important movements in American Literature, Transcendentalism. Three questions will be addressed in this article. First, why can Transcendentalism be considered a movement in spite of contradiction and disagreement among members? Second, what are the main points in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, the most representative writers of Transcendentalism? Third, is it precise to call Emerson the thinker, Thoreau the experimenter, and Whitman the singer of this movement?

Resumo:

Esse artigo tem por objetivo dar um visão geral de um dos mais importantes movimentos da literatura americana, o Transcendentalismo. Três questões serão abordadas nesse artigo. Primeiro, por que o Transcendentalismo pode ser considerado um movimento apesar da contradição e das divergências entre os membros? Segundo, quais são os principais pontos das obras de Emerson, Thoreau e Whitman, os autores mais representativos do Transcendentalismo? Terceiro, é correto considerar Emerson o pensador, Thoreau o experimentador e Whitman o cantor desse movimento?

Palavras-chave: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman

Transcendentalism is neither a religion nor a philosophy. Transcendentalism was not a coherent and consistent body of ideas and principles to be considered any one of these. The group that formed what was called the Transcendental Club did not have a unified opinion about any of the issues that a religious system or a philosophic theory would have to deal with to be seriously taken by any intellectual (cf. Blankenship: 1969). This continual contradicting, between the members of the group and also between the attitudes assumed by each member over the years, even gave origin to a joke: calling the transcendentalists "the brotherhood of the Like-minded" (Bickman: 1992, 7).

On the other hand, if the transcendentalists did not achieve a remarkable unity of thought, they did not form a totally chaotic movement either. Some ideas are defended by more than one author and can be seen as important to transcendentalism as a movement. One of these ideas is the Cartesian-like belief in the immanence of knowledge in opposition to the Lockean belief that knowledge could only come into the human mind through experience, i.e., the senses (cf. Blankenship: 1969). The transcendentalist bent in favor of a Platonic idealism rather than an Aristotelian realism led some transcendentalists, like Emerson and Thoreau, to abandon their parishes because of conflicting views on the nature of the miracles.

Emerson resigned his pastorate six years after being ordained. His justification for it was that he did not really believe in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and therefore he could not minister it in a church. This event in Emerson's life is important for those who aim at understanding his view of the world because it is linked with a very important belief of his: the belief in the existence of an inner light in all men, and even in all non-human living beings. This belief is connected to the idea that knowledge comes from intuition that has been mentioned above, but it also gives a new status to nature. The previous

American thinkers, the Puritans, never attached a high value to nature. It is scarcely mentioned in their sermons, which are far more concerned with describing hell and the tortures reserved to the sinners than with describing the more immediate surroundings of New England and the life of its inhabitants.

Another idea important to the transcendentalists that comes from the belief in the inner light is the idea best expressed in one of Emerson's most well-known essays: self-reliance. Assuming that every person has inside him/herself a spark from God, Emerson concludes that "envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he [every man] must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion" (Emerson, in Baym: 1999, 551). In other words, the human being was not only made to resemble God, but had something divine inside and should trust it blindly. "Self-reliance – a new respect for the divinity in man" (Emerson, in Baym: 1999, 562).

From this concept of self-reliance springs the idea of non-conformity. Emerson's and Thoreau's attitude towards it are probably the reasons why some critics consider Emerson the thinker of transcendentalism and Thoreau, the experimenter. Emerson presented and developed the idea of self-reliance and preached the disobedience to institutions, arguing that every person had the capacity for seeking for truth without the "aid" of books and ancient sages. However, Emerson does not seem to do what he says. By reading his essay "Self-reliance", one can easily notice that he was well acquainted with those ancient sages, and knew enough of them and their works to quote them very often.

Thoreau, in his turn, applied to his life those principles that Emerson defended in essays and lectures. Thoreau went to live in "the woods", actually a farm owned by his friend. Thoreau stopped paying his taxes, because he did not believe that any government should exist and did not agree with what the money was being used for, and went to jail. "Emerson taught the duty of non-conformity; Thoreau put his lesson into practice by refusing to conform to any institution that he disliked" (Blankenship: 1969, 303). "Emerson wrote, "Thoreau gives me in flesh and blood (...) my own ethics" (Blankenship: 1969, 310).

Because of Thoreau's experiences regarding the application of transcendentalist ideas, one can be tempted to conclude that Emerson laid the theoretical basis for the application of transcendentalism in daily life and that Thoreau actually and merely put these ideas into practice. However, it would be foolish to believe that a movement so concerned with individualism and self-reliance, a movement that guided itself by the principle of "know thyself", could admit of such a thing. If Thoreau was a real transcendentalist, and his writings leave us little doubt about the matter, he could never have simply adopted Emerson's ideas and put them into practice. It would have been more than a contradiction, something that many transcendentalists overlooked or were ready and proud to admit. It would have been an utter negation of everything that the transcendentalism was based on.

It seems more reasonable to regard them both as thinkers and experimenters. Any theory, after being tested, must undergo some changes to account for anything unexpected that might have been noticed during the experience done to prove the theory. Emerson's ideas, developed with little contact with the outer world, as he tells his readers in "Self-reliance", surely would need this type of revision. We must also not forget that Thoreau, while applying the transcendentalist ideas in his daily life, also thought and wrote about them, in his journal (fourteen volumes), in *Walden*, and in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

Thoreau has almost as many rights as Emerson to be considered a thinker of the transcendentalist movement. And, if Emerson did not spend several months of his life building his own hut among the woods and planting his own food, it must not be forgotten that he was a married man, and with children. Thoreau did not have any children, and was free to move out to a hut and live on rice. And, although Emerson was not as free as Thoreau was, he acted too, mainly against slavery.

The position assumed by Emerson and Thoreau concerning the anti-slavery movement, by the way, seems to be one of the instances when they contradicted themselves. Emerson and Thoreau held that society was a drawback. For them, there should be no constraints upon people, considering that everyone had the inner light that made the human divine. These constraints included any kind of organization or attempt to determine what other people should do, what they should think, and how they should behave. Since the human being had something divine inside, if every person did what s/he

thought was right, no prisons would be necessary. However, they did not hesitate in joining the anti-slavery movement, mainly by delivering lectures against slavery and the acts for it passed by the Senate. Nevertheless, it was an action coherent with their principles, because it was based on the idea of the inner light that they defended.

If the traditional view on Emerson and Thoreau can be questioned, the same does not seem to apply to the traditional view on Whitman. He is usually called the singer of transcendentalism. Considering that he was mainly a poet, although he also worked as a journalist, and considering also that his poems have an epic tone, he may rightfully be named such.

However, there is a fundamental difference between the transcendentalism “theorized” and lived by Emerson and Thoreau and the transcendentalism sung by Whitman. Whitman was not primarily concerned with instilling self-reliance into anyone. In what can be seen as a reflex of the process of the American independence, Whitman turned his attention to the people who lived on that land not merely as individuals, but as a group where every one had a role to play.

This does not mean that nature has no place in Whitman’s works; on the contrary, nature is mentioned openly, as in “To a President”. However, nature, in this poem, is viewed more as a source of qualities for the nation, which is the central point of the poem, as the title shows, than as a manifestation of God.

Despite this difference in the treatment of nature by these three writers, they can be seen as three men whose works are entwined together. Emerson’s and Thoreau’s are the most intimately connected of the three. They mutually influenced each other, developed each other ideas’ further, and applied them to everyday life, although it may be said that Emerson did more in the field of thinking and Thoreau, in the field of living. They have, to a certain extent, the same concerns: nature, self-reliance, the inner light. Whitman stands a little apart from them, singing, not the person who stood apart from society and listened to their divine spark, but the group that these people compose. But, no matter what differences there may be between the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman, Whitman can still be called the singer of this movement.

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