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An Intellectual Inquiry

PAUL F. BOLLER, Jr.



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**AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM,
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for Dick and Ksenija

Preface

WHAT follows is a survey of American Transcendentalism, from the 1830's to the Civil War. The major emphasis is on the nineteenth-century cluster of ideas known as the New Views; and the point of view is that of a twentieth-century writer who regards himself as partly Emersonian and partly Deweyan, partly Transcendentalist and partly empiricist. I take for granted the colossal importance of the scientific method in enabling us to generalize meaningfully about the empirical world and turn it to fruitful human purposes. But I also believe that there are irreducible (even unanalyzable) elements in human experience which transcend verbal and conceptual formulations and elude the statistical and mathematical formulations of natural science, but which are the major sources of creativity. As to methodology, I have tried to follow William James's procedure in separating existential analysis from critical evaluation and letting the Transcendentalists speak as much as possible for themselves before confronting them with the "superior wisdom" of the 1970's. The first five chapters of this book therefore are mostly devoted to recounting the story of the movement and examining its ideas, and the last chapter to deciding what is transient and what permanent in the Transcendental vision (though recogniz-

ing that standards of transience and permanence themselves shift with the passage of time). The purposes of the book, then, are both historical and transcendental. I have wanted to discuss critically but sympathetically the Transcendental movement in all its ramifications (religious radicalism, philosophical antecedents and affinities, major concepts, reform activities, and optimistic outlook), and also to analyze Transcendental ideas for their intrinsic interest and significance for all times and places. The book combines synthesis with explication and evaluation and it is primarily an intellectual rather than an economic, aesthetic, or literary inquiry.

The American Transcendentalists were enormously well-read and extraordinarily articulate. They wrote letters, journals, lectures, essays, poems, sketches, and memoirs in abundance and there is a massive treasure of fascinating material available for exploration, analysis, interpretation, and criticism. The historiography of Transcendentalism has been equally prodigious. There are few nooks and crannies left in the movement which have not been explored with infinite care and in loving detail by at least one investigator. The Transcendentalists have been perhaps the most exegeticized (they would have been appalled by it) group of literary intellectuals in American history. There has been at least as much written about Emerson as by him (though we are now down to examining his wastebasket, with, it must be acknowledged, illuminating results); in Thoreau's case, probably twice as much. My emphasis has been on Emerson and Thoreau for obvious reasons, though I have tried to do as much as space permitted with their extremely gifted associates: Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Frederic Hedge, William H. Channing, James F. Clarke, Elizabeth Peabody, Christopher Cranch, John S. Dwight, and Ellery Channing. It would

be hard to generalize about Emerson and Thoreau; but it is simply impossible to generalize with facility about Emerson, Thoreau, and all their friends and colleagues together, though I think the attempt is worth making. I have spent most of my account on the heyday of the Transcendental movement and on its intellectual life. Whether Transcendental ideas, the primary interest of this study, are still relevant to contemporary concerns readers will determine for themselves. I have proceeded on the assumption that they are.

I would like to thank John P. Diggins, Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine, for his critical reading of the first draft of this book and for his thoughtful suggestions for putting it into final form. I would also like to thank the countless young people with whom it has been my privilege for many years to discuss Transcendentalism in the classroom at Southern Methodist University, the University of Texas, and the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and from whom I learned fresh ways of viewing the Transcendentalists as well as the world of which I am a part.

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Boston, Massachusetts
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Introduction

IN the fall of 1836, the Transcendental Club held its first meeting at George Ripley's home in Boston, met irregularly for the next three or four years at various places, and then dropped out of existence. Some people thought it was typically transcendental: without constitution, dues, chairman, officers, regular members, or settled time and place of meeting, and given to airy speculations. It didn't even have a name at first. Some members called it the "Symposium" in honor of Plato; others referred to it as "Hedge's Club" because it tended to meet whenever Frederic Henry Hedge, Bangor minister, came down from Maine to visit Boston. But outsiders, amused by (and somewhat disdainful of) the elevated discussions that took place whenever the group assembled, started calling it the Transcendental Club and the name stuck. When the story got out that someone had asked Bronson Alcott at one meeting whether "omnipotence abnegates attributes," critics were convinced that the name was entirely appropriate.

Alcott, with Ralph Waldo Emerson one of the club's most faithful members, described it as "a company of earnest persons enjoying conversations on high themes and having much in common." At the second meeting, in Alcott's house, the discussion centered on a topic pro-

posed by Emerson: " 't was pity that in this Titanic continent, where nature is so grand, genius should be so tame." The Transcendentalists were always to be concerned about the derivativeness of so much of American culture. Later sessions dwelt on law, truth, individuality, theology, Providence, mysticism, pantheism, and personality, also perennial topics of interest to the Transcendentalists. The original members of the club were mostly Unitarian ministers or ex-ministers, but they soon welcomed college professors, farmers, mechanics, and merchants to their meetings. And, in an unusual action for the day, they also invited women to attend: Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Sophia Ripley. It was a relatively young group: people mainly in their twenties and thirties. The somewhat thorny Henry David Thoreau at twenty-two was the youngest to attend and the venerable Unitarian divine William Ellery Channing, who came once, was the oldest at fifty-seven. At the meetings, Frederic Hedge, according to one observer, supplied the trained philosophic mind; James Freeman Clarke, the philanthropic comprehensiveness; Theodore Parker, the robust energy; Orestes Brownson, the combative vigor; William H. Channing, young nephew of William Ellery, the lofty enthusiasm; George Ripley, the practical understanding; Alcott, the pure idealism; and Emerson, the penetrating insight.

To some people the Transcendentalists seemed a forbidding group. Emerson, perhaps the wisest of them all, was generous and kindly enough (and frequently called "angelic"), but extremely reserved and dignified and, as he rather regretfully admitted, not given to easy camaraderie. Thoreau, his young friend, was skeptical, blunt, and acerbic; a kind of Yankee Diogenes who (said Oliver Wendell Holmes) insisted on nibbling his asparagus at the wrong end. Margaret Fuller was brilliant, headstrong, and outspoken; she once announced that

she found no intellect in America comparable to her own. When Elizabeth Peabody, who ran a bookshop in Boston which was a gathering place for literati and reformers, told her that she walked into church as if she felt superior to everybody there, she exclaimed unhesitatingly: "Well, I did feel so." Theodore Parker impressed everyone with his vast energy and his even vaster erudition; he had a canine appetite, it was clear, for devouring new information in a dozen languages. Orestes Brownson was the polemicist of the group; willing and eager to take on all comers, he was convinced of the unassailability of each new position which he adopted from time to time. Even the Transcendentalists found him formidable and some of them were pleased when he stopped coming to meetings of the club.

Hostile observers complained that the Transcendentalists were arrogant. Young George Curtis saw some of them sitting around in Emerson's library in Concord one day, dignified and erect, as if to ask (so he imagined): "Who will now proceed to say the finest thing that has ever been said?" But he soon learned that his initial impression was mistaken and he came later to write about them with sympathy and affection. The Transcendentalists were unquestionably proud; they admired strength, courage, self-confidence, and independence of mind. But they were also modest, for they were relentlessly self-critical, endlessly eager to expand their knowledge, experience, and understanding of life, and painfully aware of the deficiencies in depth, scope, and originality of the American culture which was their heritage. They were also on the whole a generous and compassionate group; they wanted to help others to find themselves and put their talents to use in enriching American life. They were especially interested in young men and women of promise and they were anxious to encourage intellectual and spiritual growth in the emerging genera-

tion. In a lecture on "Human Life" given in Boston in December, 1838, Emerson explained Transcendental aspirations for American youth:

This *deliquium*, this ossification of the soul, is the Fall of Man. The redemption is lodged in the heart of youth. To every young man and woman the world puts the same question, Wilt thou become one of us? And to this question the soul in each of them says heartily, No. . . . No matter though the young heart do not yet understand itself, do not know well what it wants, and so contents itself with saying, No, No, to unamiable tediousness, or breaks out into sallies of extravagance. There is hope in extravagance; there is none in routine.

The hostile attitude of young persons toward society makes them very undesirable companions to their friends, querulous, opinionative, impracticable; and it makes them unhappy in their solitude. If it continues too long it makes shiftless and morose men. Yet, on the whole, this crisis which comes in so forbidding and painful shape in the life of each earnest man has nothing in it that need alarm or confound us. In some form the question comes to each: Will you fulfill the demands of the soul, or will you yield to the conventions of the world? None can escape the challenge.

Then, addressing young people directly, Emerson exclaimed:

But why need you sit there, pale, and pouting, or why with such a mock-tragic air affect discontent and superiority? The bugbear of society is such only until you have accepted your own law. Then all

omens are good, all stars auspicious, all men your allies, all parts of life take order and beauty.

Emerson realized that older people tended to distrust him and that young people admired him. The young were clearly his main audience; they came to his house in Concord to have earnest discussions with him and they sent him letters from all over the United States and from Europe and Asia as well. Even some of the Transcendentalists thought they worshipped him too blindly and Parker grumbled about youthful "Emersonidae" with bad manners. But Emerson never demeaned the young by seeking their adoration; nor did he insult them by flattery. He took them seriously by criticizing as well as encouraging them. He wanted to open their eyes to the beauties, dignities, and opportunities of life, present them with lofty goals, and stimulate them to noble behavior and high achievement.

Emerson's associates agreed in the main with his hopes for the young, but there was nothing monolithic about Transcendentalism. James F. Clarke once quipped that the Transcendental Club was called "the club of the like-minded; I suppose because no two of us thought alike." The Transcendentalists were not a compact group; there was no party line and they did not see eye to eye on everything. Emerson liked Thoreau's free and erect mind but was vexed by his penchant for paradox; he hailed Alcott as an original thinker, but sometimes thought he was a "tedious Archangel." Margaret Fuller worshipped Emerson, but complained (as did other Transcendentalists) that he "always seemed to be on stilts," and Emerson for his part found her a little too impetuous for his nature. George Ripley was disappointed in Emerson for refusing to join the Brook Farm Community and he deplored Alcott's humorlessness.

Thoreau was repelled by Ripley's experiment at Brook Farm, but Emerson took a friendly interest in it. Brownson sent his son there but his enthusiasm for Ripley's enterprise was highly restrained. The unworldly though perspicacious Alcott observed the Concord group with affection and considerable shrewdness and went his own merry way (with occasional financial assistance from Emerson) serenely and imperturbably (most of the time). Ripley found strengths and limitations in his Transcendental friends and they in him. Thoreau was mainly impressed by the limitations. Theodore Parker (whom Emerson called "our Savonarola") told John Sullivan Dwight, the musician of the group: "You love vagueness, mistaking the indefinite for the Infinite." Dwight told Parker: "You write, you read, you talk, you think, in a hurry, for fear of not getting all." And so it went. Still, amid all the rumbling and grumbling, the Transcendentalists were in essential accord on fundamentals; they were familiar with each other's work, commented on it freely, and exchanged opinions amicably enough most of the time. There was both conflict and consensus among the Transcendentalists. There were also unresolved tensions in their thinking: parochial prejudices but cosmopolitan concerns; ambivalence toward social action; a passion for amassing empirical data to bolster intuitive certainties; and an unceasing alternation (especially in Emerson's case) between monism and pluralism, universalism and individualism, mysticism and empiricism, religion and science, society and solitude, reform and repose. James Russell Lowell was perceptive in seeing Emerson as a kind of "Plotinus-Montaigne." There was something of mystic and skeptic in most of the Transcendentalists.

The heyday of Transcendentalism was in the 1830's and 1840's and to later generations of Americans its interior life has seemed of greatest interest. The external

story was not spectacular. It concerned mainly young people in the Boston and Cambridge area during the Age of Jackson who were mostly educated at Harvard, theologically trained, middle-class, and Puritan and Unitarian in background. A brief chronology would perhaps begin in 1832, when Emerson left the ministry, and proceed swiftly to 1836, the *annus mirabilis* of the movement, during which Emerson published *Nature*, the Transcendentalists' Bible, Ripley published *Discourses on the Philosophy of Religion*, Brownson published *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church*, Alcott published *Record of Conversations on the Gospel* (based on classroom discussions in his Temple School in Boston and provoking severe criticism), and the Transcendental Club met for the first time; then move to 1837, when Emerson delivered his Phi Beta Kappa address on "The American Scholar" at Harvard, which Lowell called "an event without any former parallel in our literary annals"; to 1838, the year of Emerson's Divinity School Address at Harvard which touched off a great storm in religious circles; 1840 (the founding of the *Dial*, a Transcendental magazine which "enjoyed its obscurity," to use Emerson's words, for four years); 1841 (the launching of Ripley's Brook Farm experiment); 1842 (Alcott's experiment at Fruitlands); 1845 (Thoreau went to Walden); and 1846 (Thoreau went to jail). The Transcendental story, externally, centered largely on conversations, exchanges of letters, lecture engagements, publication dates, and journal entries. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, however, the Transcendentalists found themselves, somewhat to their own surprise, becoming increasingly involved in abolitionism, attending rallies, participating in demonstrations, and delivering speeches at antislavery meetings.

Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement and it is located in the history of

American thought as post-Unitarian and freethinking in religion, as Kantian and idealistic in philosophy, and as Romantic and individualistic in literature. The religious impulse, however, was primary; piety concerned the Transcendentalists, especially in the beginning, even more than moralism. By the 1830's, the Unitarian consensus which educated and established people in the Boston area found comfortable and satisfying had lost its emotional appeal for thoughtful and sensitive young people. It "seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life," Parker recalled. "It is negative, cold, lifeless," complained Brownson, "and all advanced minds among Unitarians are dissatisfied with it, and are craving something higher, better, more living, and lifegiving." Emerson thought that Unitarian affirmations had become largely verbal. "We die of words," he exclaimed. "We are hanged, drawn and quartered by dictionaries. . . . When shall we attain to be real, and be born into the new heaven and earth of nature and truth?" The Transcendental revolt began as a quest for new ways of conceiving the human condition to replace old ways that no longer carried conviction. It also involved the search for new vocations since the clerical profession for which so many of the Transcendentalists had been trained had ceased to be a live option for most of them. Transcendentalism, in short, was mainly an enterprise undertaken by bright young Unitarians to find meaning, pattern, and purpose in a universe no longer managed by a genteel and amiable Unitarian God.

There was, to be sure, no one precise "cause" for the genesis of Transcendentalism. With the New Views, as with other patterns of ideas that suddenly catch on with sizable numbers of people, chance, coincidence, and the accidental concatenation of several independent events probably explains what happened. (Whether there is a

meaningful pattern in coincidences, as Emerson in his day and Arthur Koestler in our own have contended, remains an open question for this particular student of ideas.) Several tendencies of thought and action seem to have converged in the 1830's in New England to precipitate the solution which we call Transcendentalism: the steady erosion of Calvinism; the progressive secularization of modern thought under the impact of science and technology; the emergence of a Unitarian intelligentsia with the means, leisure, and training to pursue literature and scholarship; the increasing insipidity and irrelevance of liberal religion to questing young minds; the intrusion of the machine into the New England garden and the disruption of the old order by the burgeoning industrialism; the impact of European ideas on Americans traveling and studying abroad; the appearance of talented and energetic young people like Emerson and Thoreau on the scene; and the imperatives of logic itself for those who take ideas seriously (the impossibility, for instance, of accepting modern science without revising traditional religious views). Perhaps youth—if it is serious enough, sufficiently talented, adequately informed, and willing to work hard—is the indispensable element for stirring the various tendencies of thought into a new heady brew for the emerging generation to quaff. The Transcendentalists, at any rate, seem to have thought so. They were not radicals in the political sense; but the questions they asked of their country and their age were devastating. “We come down with free thinking into the dear institutions,” Emerson mused, “and at once make carnage among them.” Many of the questions the Transcendentalists posed—and the answers they proposed—have passed into the mainstream of American critical thought and continue to challenge America's more conventional wisdom.

For its participants, Transcendentalism was an ex-