

## INFLUENCE OF THE TRANSCENDENTAL MOVEMENT ON THOREAU

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### ABSTRACT

*American Transcendentalism was essentially an indigenous movement, which though showed foreign inflames developed along independent lines in American-Literature. First appearing as, 'The latest form of infidelity' and later recognised for the importance of its literary contributors, it was perhaps the major liberating force of the period and as such made significant contributions to a number of areas. Transcendentalism was a developing movement and not a static philosophy.*

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The word 'Transcendentalism' sounds to have some unearthly music about it and one catches oneself echoing: Bliss was it in that Dawn to be alive, But to be young was very Heaven. (*The French Revolution*, by William Wordsworth). What William Wordsworth said of the French Revolution seems to be true of American Transcendentalism, than of that much celebrated event which gave the world watchwords of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and which while it inspired young men to high thinking and noble endeavour, some disillusioned them.

Frothingham one of its most penetrating historians describes it as, "An assertion of the inalienable worth of man" and it is this assertion by a few fervent souls that marked the full flowing of New England Renaissance. Orestes Brownson puts it thus, "Some of them embrace transcendental philosophy, plant themselves on their instincts and wait for the huge world to come round to them." So, there were as many transcendentalists as there were transcendentalisms. Indeed as Alcott said, "Each member of the transcendental group was free to mount his own hobby and ride to his heart's content." (The American Republic).

Transcendentalists were separate thinkers, logical system builders and a group of radical individualists who often disagreed with each other. For these reasons, no successful definition of transcendentalism has been given. Emerson called it 'Idealism as in 1842 A.D.' Yet this accurately applied only to a certain New England Group. Calbot's assertion that Transcendentalism was 'Romanticism on Puritan Grounds' is also too broad. Transcendentalism, to put it plainly was a hodge-podge, a vague leaning towards the 'beyond'. Of the central group, all were New Englanders and Unitarians. Most of them were from Harvard. All had at one time been clergymen,

or teachers and came from professional or classical families. They were all serious, religious, intent on self-improvement, independent and individualists. Though some were more wearily mystical, others were Unitarians, some were against the Church. They were substantially alike as intuitive idealists. Negatively they rejected these ideas- The materialistic psychology and anti-idealist features of Locke's philosophy, the associacist psychology which denied the active shaping power of the human mind, the concept of mechanical universe with a bystanding God. The theory of total depravity, pre-destination and permission, the idea of thrift, industry and profit and lastly, the improvement of society, the will of majority. They adopted the idea of an intuitive idealism which accepted ideas as ultimates, a view of imagination or intuition, the concept of organic universe in which nature is suffused by an imminent God. A living religion in which miracles seemed natural; Divinity of man who consequently did not need salvation, a concept of genius which produce work of art, a freedom of spontaneity in art. An individual moral insight, self-improvement as the primary avenue of social improvement. Reliance on God rather than conformity to the will of political or social majority and ofcourse optimism.

There was a direct influence of Kant's Transcendentalism and an indirect influence of Coleridge and Carlyle on Emerson and rest of the group. There was also an influence of Indian Scriptures and New-Platonism. Young men in New England like their counterparts English Romantics asserted that they would refuse to live by 'sobriety and decorum' alone and that there were requirements of the soul which demands satisfaction even though responsibility must be defied and shocked. There were many prominent members of this group but Emerson and Thoreau's Transcendentalism found its free function. William Canning complained that heart of New England was 'pulverised' and the freshness of life was exhausted under the Unitarian influence. Theodore Parker was an excellent scholar who was in contrast with the best minds of his days. Margaret Fuller was the distinguished editor of Transcendental Journal. She fought for equality of the sexes. Some of her followers thought that her ideas needed sobre re-thinking whereas the others advised her for her fearless assertion of her conviction and her deep living faith in good humanity. George Repley was another important member of this group.

Emerson had a great influence of India. Emerson's writings were characterized by spontaneous reaction to beauty. But, Emerson's transcendentalism was charged of being shallow optimism- the optimism of one who had no idea of suffering, had not known the vale of tears. Despite all this it is rather in Thoreau that nature pulsates with life. Born on July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau was a man who opposed the economic system, the government, and the social customs of the nineteenth century society in which he lived. As a result, he neither starved nor was struck by lightning. Instead, he spent one night in prison and the remaining part of his life, as nearly as any man can, doing exactly what he wished. Two of his 44 years, Thoreau spent alone in the forest at Walden Pond, living in a one-room house which he had built himself.

Thoreau, like Emerson, was a learned man. While Emerson preached, Thoreau wanted to test the transcendentalist ideas on his pulse. His two basic tenets of philosophy were that man should advance confidently in the directions of his dreams and live a simple life. Thoreau says that with simplicity Universe will appear less complex. Thoreau like other transcendentalists, was essentially an eclectic. He derived his ideas from different sources, accepting what interested him, and ignoring the rest. Thoreau started as a critic of society, because he thought that man were leading mean and sordid lives. He had a great faith in the dignity of individual and man's capacity to remake itself. He believed that man is a self-asserting and self-transcending individual. He should acknowledge his oneness with something which is higher than himself yet he should cherish his independence and uniqueness as an individual. Individual happiness will always depend on the synthesis of these two contradictory impulses in human nature. The revolution he proclaimed was a one man revolution which each one could make for himself, without waiting for others to join him. In his essay on 'Civil Disobedience', Thoreau suggests that every individual has a right to resist the government, if it tyrannises over the individual. In the same essay, he presents the motto: "That Government is best which governs the least."

Government according to him does not keep the country free. It does not educate. It places all sorts of impediments and hindrances in the way of the public progress. He feels that Government kills our conscience and common sense. The mass of men serve the state not as men mainly but as machines with their bodies.

Such a government, he knew, could never bring about reform. He had no faith in mass reforms. He believed that all reforms must come from within. We can only reform individuals. Reform through legislations may achieve temporary results, but lasting reformation will be achieved only when each individual reforms himself. Such is the basic belief of all the transcendentalists. Thoreau, in fact was suspicious of reforms as a class. Thoreau in his book 'Walden' raises this question: "You who govern the public affairs, what need have you to employ punishment? Love virtue and people will be virtuous." It is thus we can explain Thoreau's refusal to pay a tax to or recognise the authority of the state that buys and sells men, women and children like cattle at the doors of its senate house."

A great champion of liberty, Thoreau teaches us to resist the social pressure and to carve our own paths in life. Thoreau wanted to earn his living by loving. While to the rest of the world, Sunday was the Sabbath day, he said that work for one day in a week and keep other days for joys and wander.

Thoreau had a fiery hatred of wrong and he had in him the ingredients of heroism. He was no American Rousseau who retired to escape men. Thoreau did not escape into the woods by going to Walden. Rather he went to face the facts of life; without intervening the barriers of society. He had many lives to live and going to Walden was one. He went to the Walden Pond to discover himself and to prepare a life of vigorous action, "I went to the woods because I wished to live

deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die; discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life.” (Walden) Even at the Walden Pond, Thoreau did not cut himself completely from society. He went there, not to escape life, but to escape, into it. Thoreau went to Walden to prepare for life, ‘To live like a philosopher’. Thoreau diagnosed the diseases of economic life with great insight. During those days, Industrial revolution was transforming the pattern of life. Mechanization was the theme of the day. He was very critical of the prevailing economic system. He studied the whole problem and concluded that it had become the major aim of business not to serve mankind but to accumulate wealth for its own sake. He realized that accumulation of wealth was pointless; it “needlessly complicated existence and enslaved those who fall prey to its allurements.” The unfair distribution of wealth left many in dire need; and ostentatious display of wealth left many in dire need; and ostentatious display of wealth was a direct incentive to crime. This economic system was gradually reducing man to an automation and his soul was being bartered away. Thoreau believed that man must not waste his life, getting and spending, instead he must have a broad margin to his life. As long as possible man must live free and uncommitted. Thoreau knew the corrupting influence of money, so he lived a simple life. He had only three chairs in his house. *One for Solitude, two for friendship and three for society.* (Walden) Such a life will obviate the use of machines- machines which constrict rather than free the soul of man.

Thoreau advocates a life of simplicity and instructs the reader to thrive on the raw materials of nature. Thoreau saw a close association with Nature as a means towards a fuller life. To him Nature was a panacea for all the ills of civilization. He was in communion with nature. The lake was to him, “A perfect forest mirror.” (Walden). The earth’s eye looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The trees standing are, “The slender eyelashes that fringe it and the wooden balls and cliffs are its overhanging brows.” (Walden) Thoreau felt that if we observe the beauties of nature minutely, we can strike a companionship but unfortunately, man has lost the powers of perception with the result that springs of joy in him have dried up. He feels that if nature is deforested there will be no poetry.

Thoreau believed that institutionalized churches were a blight on society, it is entirely false to think of Thoreau, as irreligious. His ‘theology’ was not a branch of metaphysics. It was based on the experience of life. Thus, unlike some of his fellow transcendentalists, Thoreau did not naively deny the existence of evils. He rejected orthodox theology and dogma but he believed in God as well as in man. He had no faith in institutions because they were not organized for the natural and moral good of man. For him orientation in nature is not “back to nature” in Rousseauistic sense but rather it is the transcendental idea “through nature to God”. Thoreau found as much of value in Confucianism, Buddhism and other major oriental religions, as in Christianity. He believed that the philosophers of all sects, all nations are alike. Says he, “I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha the great spirit, as well as God.” (Walden)

The influence of transcendentalism is seen in the concluding paragraph of the Chapter, 'The Pond in Winter' from his book 'Walden'. He writes, "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagwat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the Gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! There I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favouring winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis and the Hesperides, making the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names."

Uncompromising in his war against the factory system, corporations, the spiritual barrenness of American life, industrial expansion, obedience to the voice of an unjust government, materialism, opportunism, and hypocrisy, which he early discovered as the most dangerous of pitfalls in a free society, Thoreau could see the sandy bottom of the stream of time without failing in his job of fishing for eternities. Because he could rejoice in and use well the freedom that was given to him, he seems not only the harshest critic and stern nonconformist, but the great lover and friend of his land. For Thoreau, it was an exciting experience to be member of the most intellectual society in America. Thus, it would be a mistake to think that all idealism and integrity of soul and purity of heart could fade away into nothingness. Actually, Transcendentalism won all its points. Like transcendentalists we are also caught up by crisis of spirit that carries with it implications not merely for the American Predicament but also for our modern mechanical societies. For the predicament of Americans, or soon will be, the predicament of the rest of the world.

It is undoubtedly their faith in the imagination and in themselves as practitioners of imagination that enabled Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman to achieve supreme confidence in their own moral and metaphysical insights. There existed between these five Americans and their Europeans contemporaries a community of interest based on the use of a common vocabulary, of a common set of problems approached in a common spirit. This community helps explain the promptness with which Emerson, Thoreau, and others of the group were "discovered" and acclaimed abroad. European philosophical theory, acting as a primary catalyst for forces already indigenous to the American mind, had affected and accelerated a reorientation of literature which was tantamount to rising it to a new plane. Having revealed the American character and experience as identical in form and substance with the character and experience of man everywhere. Transcendentalism had created the conditions whereby American Literature without ceasing to be national could become a part of world literature.



And it is one measure of the genius of Thoreau, ‘The Concord’s Happy Rebel’ who made ‘Walden’ a powerful document in nonconformity which still keeps, like the Grecian classics, its golden and autumnal tint and breathes the serene and celestial atmosphere – and even today beats a different drum.

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