



## American Idealism in Nature

Romanticism influenced the imaginative writing of authors like Hawthorne and Poe as well as the philosophical writings of the time. During that period, philosophical activity was stronger in New England. Puritanism as well as organized religion had weakened in the region. Yet, philosophers were in search of a philosophical system which would include morality, and justify a spiritual view of the world. This was found in the Romantic philosophy of idealism, known as Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism favored the validity of intuition, beyond reason, as a means of comprehending. Whatever a person knew by transcending the experience of his/her senses was fundamental to reality. What was most deeply felt or understood to be true, the understanding of intuition was true insight and perception. This fundamental, irrational view of knowledge resulted from the Romantic influence on this new philosophy.

Transcendentalism stressed the importance of the individual as well. Since each person could discover truth by intuition one did not need any dogma or established authority. The soul of each individual was the microcosm of the world. Each individual was therefore fully gifted so he could be totally in-

dependent. Self reliance came to be seen as the principal virtue of Transcendentalism.

According to the Transcendentalist view each person had such powers because he/she was a part of nature. Since nature was the expression of God, then the World and God were one and the same. The human being then was a divine expression, with a mind and a soul of his own. Transcendentalists saw God as an "Over-Soul" or "Supreme Mind".

The philosophy of idealism was extremely optimistic and its followers believed in the kindness of nature and in the power of the human being. A great number of followers held that evil was merely the absence of good. Their optimism was due to the American condition with the country continually expanding west, encompassing new and rich land, where independent and productive citizens prospered. Satisfaction with the success they had in the new country and society brought on a widespread sense optimism with the future.

Belief in the individual, in intuition, in nature and the optimism preached by Transcendentalism, permeated American culture. The main spokesman for this trend was Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the founders of Transcendentalism.

### Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 ~ 1882)



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
Culver Pictures

American essayist and poet, a leader of the philosophical movement of transcendentalism, Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Seven of his ancestors were ministers, and in 1829 Emerson became a Protestant minister in Boston. In 1832 Emerson resigned from his pastoral appointment because of personal doubts on religion. He traveled to England, where he met several British writers, including Walter Savage Landor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and William Wordsworth.

Upon returning to the United States he worked on the formulation of his own theory of Transcendentalism. The movement was concentrated in New England and spread throughout the country. Emerson had enduring influence over his own and following generations.

The extract below is from Emerson's "*Nature*" - an essay considered the best expression of Transcendentalist thought.

### *Nature*

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The fore-going generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature,

why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Undoubtedly we have not questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition

is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approach to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth, that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are esteemed unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is, that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable; as language, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, sex.

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under the name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses; in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. "Nature", in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. "Art" is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not

solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impressions made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their deeds give no ownership."

## DISCUSSION:

1. Do you believe Transcendentalism is a valid philosophy?
2. What made Transcendentalism especially appealing to Americans?
3. How does Transcendentalism seem to play a part in the present day?
4. According to Emerson, what is the condition of man's relationship with nature?
5. What evidence of optimistic outlook do you see in this extract?
6. What is Emerson's idea of "nature" and "art"?