

AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM - IS IT REDEMPTIVE OR REGENERATIVE? - A STUDY

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"The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

-William Wordsworth.

The weariness of the material life as opposed to the transcendental philosophy lay bare in these above lines of Wordsworth's sonnet 'The world Is Too Much With Us'. The claims of materialism at the cost of neglecting our spirituality is highlighted. The intellectual contemplation on the term 'transcendentalism' leads to spiritual awareness. Transcendentalism is not a religion. It is an idealistic and pragmatic philosophy that mainly focuses on the individualistic aspects of present life. There are several approaches and approximations to the concept of transcendentalism.

In the philosophical context, transcendentalism has been defined as "the recognition in man of the capacity of knowing truth intuitively or of attaining knowledge transcending the reach of the senses"¹. The transcendentalists are the strong believers in the power of the individual and divine messages. They had eternal faith in the truth that for every person there exists a private relationship between the self and the universe and they thought that every individual has a universal soul. Transcendentalism is based on the belief that human beings have self - wisdom and it encouraged individuals to find their own voice and reject social expectations of conformity and conventionality. The transcendentalists believed in intuitive thought that is the ability to know something through instinctive feelings rather than conscious reasoning. According to transcendentalists, the flashes of intuition are the most fundamental form of knowledge. They believed that the intuition could be provided by the universal soul.

The chief assets of transcendentalism are

- It questioned established cultural forms.
- Urged to reintegrate spirit and matter.
- Turned ideas into concrete action.
- Developed a momentum of its own.
- Influenced the spheres of religion, education, literature, philosophy and social reform.
- Posited the essential divinity of man as opposed to tenet of innate depravity.
- Proposed self - trust and self - reliance
- Believed in democracy and individualism
- Trust in intimate relationship with nature
- Believed that human being have self - wisdom intuitively

Transcendentalism has been a divine religio - philosophical idealistic and literary movement in the history of nineteenth century American literature and thought. This movement has developed during the late 1820 s and 30 s in the Eastern region of the United States as a protest against the general state of spirituality and in particular the state of intellectualism at Harvard University and the doctrine of the Unitarian. Unitarianism was strongly established when there was a remarkable break with Calvinism. William Ellery Channing -the most influential of the early Unitarians and formulator of American Unitarianism delivered a speech on 'moral argument against Calvinism' - against orthodox beliefs. In 1831 Emerson brought out a formula of compromise between Calvinistic and Unitarian groups. Emerson felt that the Calvinistic ideals were highly rigid and he knew that the Unitarian principles were very liberal. He urged the people to borrow something of eternal truth from both these opinions. The third important group was the Quakers. They believed in the divinity of Christ and in the Bible as the inspired word of god. They insisted upon the essential sinfulness of man. Quakerism was more benevolent and humanitarian than Calvinism and more pietistic than Unitarianism.

There was a strong sense of dissatisfaction and disbelief in the doctrines and laws of the church. The church had become too conservative. This sort of religious background prepared the way for transcendentalism by insisting that man is essentially good and that man may trust his own perceptions of religious truth. William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian, Spoke of "the confidence which is due to our rational and moral faculties in religion".. Channing the Unitarian stressed on conscious reasoning but Emerson the representative of transcendentalism brought out the major distinction between 'understanding' and the 'Realism'. According to Emerson the sense of 'understanding' comes out of rational faculty and the 'reason' remains as an individual's supra rational or intuitive faculty.

Every individual is an eternal source of intuitive reasoning skill, free thinking and self - reliance. Transcendentalism is a philosophy emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical. This philosophical concept called on people to view the objects in the world as small versions of the whole universe and to trust their individual intuitions. It is a system developed by Immanuel Kant an eminent philosopher which is based on the idea that in order to understand the reality one must first examine and analyze the reasoning process which governs the nature of experience. Immanuel Kant had called all knowledge transcendental which is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects. The New England intellectuals of the early 19th of embraced Kant's philosophy and German idealism as an alternative to and as a reaction against 18th century rationalism. John Locke's philosophy of sensualism and Calvinism transcendentalism plays a vital role in the reformation of the doctrines and laws of the church. It is fundamentally composed of a variety of diverse sources including Hindu Vedic texts, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

In 1832 Emerson founded transcendentalism as the Unitarianism was not sufficient to rehabilitate individual. Emerson's 'nature' (1836) was the "Bible of the early transcendentalists". There was a transcendental club - that served as a center of activity. Apart from this there was a quarterly magazine 'the Dial' that insisted on transcendentalist principles. This magazine has been edited by Margaret Fuller (1840-1842) and by Emerson (1842-1844). Emerson in the opening number of the Dial says "the spirit of the time is in every form a protest against usage and search for principles. A clear picture of this philosophic concept can be perceived in the definition given below

"Transcendentalism was a distinct philosophical system. Practically it was an assertion of the inalienable worth of man; theoretically it was an assertion of the immanence of divinity in instinct, the transference of supernatural attributes to the natural constitutions of mankind. Transcendentalism is usually spoken of as a philosophy. It is more justly regarded as a gospel. As a philosophy it is so far from uniform, that it may rather be considered several systems than one... transcendentalism was Enthusiasm, a wave of sentiment, a breath of mind.

Transcendentalism should not be confined to only philosophical context. It has got literary background in European romanticism and individualism. To romanticism it owed the concept of nature as a living mystery. Emerson's 'nature' is a manifesto of transcendentalism that is closely related to the worship of nature writers of the romantic age like Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge.

*A subtle chain of countless rings
Next unto the farthest brings
The eye reads omens where it goes
And speaks all languages the rose;
And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form - (Nature).*

The influence of European romanticism is highly noticeable in the above mentioned lines of Emerson. The pioneers of transcendentalism are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. The other important expositors are Amos Bronson Alcott, Oreste Augustus Brownson, William Ellery Channing, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Charles Anderson Dana, John Sullivan Dwight, Frederick Henry Hedge, James Marsh and Theodore Parker. Apart from such social theorists, educators and reformists, the other remarkable followers of transcendentalism are Hawthorne Melville, Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allen Poe. Emerson's *Nature* suggests that divinity suffuses nature and reality can be understood by studying the celestial aspects of nature. Emerson's nature consists of eight sections: nature, commodity, beauty, language, discipline, idealism, spirit and prospects. Each section deals with relationship between humans and nature. 'Wholeness' in nature can be experienced only when the people are separated and detached from the flaws and distractions imposed on them. Solitude is the only chief means of getting fully engaged in the world of nature.

“To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars”(Nature)

Access to nature leads mankind to peak and happiness. “Nature in its ministry to man, is not only the material but also the process and the result”. All the parts incessantly work in to each other’s hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seeds; the sun evaporates the sea, the wind blows, the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet condenses the rain on this; the rain feeds the planet; the planet feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man” (Nature). Emerson thus depicts the transcendental union between mankind and nature. Nature should be accepted as ‘universal being’.

Emerson uses spirituality as the main theme of ‘Nature’. Emerson believed in reimagining the divine as something large and visible, which he referred to as nature; such an idea is known as transcendentalism. According to Emerson nature is regarded as ‘universal being’ and he believed that there was a spiritual sense of the natural world around him. Depicting this sense of ‘universal being’ Emerson states “The aspect of nature is devout like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship”⁴. Here nature is treated as a living soul and as a manifestation of the divine. It has an independent entity and a soul. Man is also considered not merely as a social or political product but as a spark of the divine -a spiritual entity.

Emerson, the most influential American thinker of the nineteenth century, got acquaintance with the writers of the Romantic Movement when travelled to England; he was greatly influenced by the writers of Romanticism-which stressed the human development of emotional forms of expressions -based on the ideas and principles of Romanticism. Emerson, like Wordsworth believed that one could transcend the materialistic world of sense experience and become conscious of the all - pervading spirit of the universe and that God could best be founded by looking into one’s own soul. These words which are “finite organs of the infinite mind” can be compared to Wordsworth’s transcendental ideas who felt:

..... *A sense sublime*
Of something for more deeply interfused
A motion and a spirit that impels
An thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things: . (Prelude)

The seeds of transcendentalism spring from romanticism.

In his essay self - reliance Emerson expressed his view that “people should cast off the behaviors and formulas of past times and create new forms of expression. The old ways having become dead to you prevent you from making yourself clear- to initiate, to invent you own way we need self - reliance”

Thoreau a well-known transcendentalist was Emerson's student. Many passages in Thoreau seem echoes of Emerson through Thoreau's expression of the thought is always more concrete than Emerson's. Thoreau called himself a transcendentalist. He wrote in his journal in 1853 " I am a mystic, a transcendentalist and a natural philosopher to boot".

Thoreau was against the greed and materialism that was affecting Americans in their daily lives. The basic tenets of his philosophy of life were that man should advance confidently in the direction of his dream and that he should live a simple life.

Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity!. I say let your affairs be as two or three and not a hundred or a thousand; Instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb - nail . Simplify, Simplify instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five, and reduce other things in proportion. (Walden)

Thoreau gave importance to two aspects of Transcendentalism - The first one was the stress which it laid upon solitary communion with the Infinite. The second aspect was the assurance it afforded him that what his intuition told him was right. This aspect seems to be unconventional. In Walden he has drawn a distinction between himself and his fellow transcendentalists, while distinguishing between philosophers and professors of philosophy.

"There are nowadays professors of philosophy. but not philosophers. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, not even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live of a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically but practically".(Walden)

Thoreau resembles Keats when he had purposely withdrawn from the mundane realities of life in order to lose himself in the mystic nature. Keats poetic lines find an echo in Thoreau's Transcendental companionship with nature.

*Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever and the fret
Here, where man sit and hear each other groan'
(Ode to Nightingale, stanza III)*

'The desirability of communion with nature was one of the few articles of faith in which all transcendentalists agreed. Instead of indulging in mere theory Thoreau would be putting his belief into practice. At the same time he would be doing what he longed most to do'. The apt observation of Crawford brings out the transcendentalist nature of Thoreau's poetic art

Thoreau's transcendentalist experiences when he went to the Walden Pond find divine expression in the following lines of Thoreau.

Time is but the stream I go a fishing in. I drink at it, but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. It is thin current slides away but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter or alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born'. (Walden)

Whitman, the world famous American poet stands supreme among the transcendentalists in the history of American literature; his 'Song of Myself' echoes principles of Transcendentalism - free thinking, self-reliance and non-conformity, growth and renewal of individual, revolt against tradition and established institutions, brotherhood of man, love for nature and spiritual unity. According to all transcendentalists "words are finite organs of the infinite mind" as Emerson says in 'nature' Whitman found nature to be symbolic of spiritual facts and he indulged enormously in mystical speculations. The possibility through asceticism of uniting contemplation and action became for Whitman a further guide towards fulfillment.

Whitman in 'Song Of Myself' gave an inventory of major religions and indicated he respected and accepted all of them - a sentiment he further emphasized in his poem 'With Antecedents'. He affirmed "I adopt each theory, myth, god and demi-god / I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies are true, without exception" - Whitman incorporated transcendentalism and realism in his works.

Transcendentalism refers to a philosophy emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical: Transcendentalists look of nature as a metaphor of human mind. To sum up, the transcendentalists are not the poets of the body but poets of the soul and they are being identified as the best and distinguished world poets.

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