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## ❑ TRANSCENDENTALISM

Transcendentalism was a pre-Civil War movement of theological change and bold literary expression that influenced many institutional and social reforms and helped define the American concept of individualism. Marked by idealism and high moral seriousness, yet notoriously difficult to define, transcendentalism was not a formal movement. Beginning as a critique of rigid religious formalism, it lacked doctrines, creeds, and organizational structure. Centered in Greater Boston, Massachusetts—and in the small town of Concord—it was sometimes ridiculed as provincial; but its influence extended beyond its New England roots, and it drew inspiration and force from several international contexts, including classical philosophy, British and European Romanticism, and Asian spirituality. Its name seemed to imply an airy escape from the demands of the world (the term *transcendentalism* actually refers to intuitive, as opposed to merely sensory, means of knowing the world), but many of its adherents focused on the immediacy of tangible, daily experience. Often viewed as a stance of absolute individualism, transcendentalism stressed ethical integrity, and its major figures were committed to human rights and social justice.

## FROM SELF-CULTURE TO NONCONFORMITY

Liberal Unitarians in New England in the first decades of the nineteenth century had challenged lingering Calvinist doctrines of original sin and human depravity. The Reverend William Ellery Channing (1780–1842) in 1828 had preached the liberating concept of man’s “likeness to God” and encouraged life-long dedication to “self-culture.” Transcendentalism emerged in the mid-1830s as a further expression of disaffection with the constraining cultural and spiritual legacy of the previous generation. The little book *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) became the most influential of several books published in 1836 that called for philosophical, religious, and educational reform. We are smothered by the past, Emerson declared, because of our timid, misplaced reverence for institutions and tradition. “Why,” he asked, “should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Myerson 2000, p. 125). In his address to graduates of the Divinity School at Harvard in 1838, Emerson challenged the prospective ministers to avoid rote preaching and to realize the power of their calling by “convert[ing] life into truth” (Myerson 2000, p. 239); his appeal was seen by the scandalized Harvard establishment and other social conservatives as an act of “infidelity.” “Self-Reliance” (1841), Emerson’s most famous essay, cemented his reputation as the champion of individualism: “Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string”; “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (Myerson 2000, pp. 320, 321).

Henry D. Thoreau (1817–1862), an admirer of Emerson, brought nonconformity squarely into the political arena in “Resistance to Civil Government” (“Civil Disobedience,” 1849). Thoreau had been arrested and confined for one night in the Concord jail for refusing to pay a poll tax that, he argued, promoted the war against Mexico as a means to expand slave territory. The age had seen the rise of the Jacksonian common man, but Thoreau warned that democracy fostered conformity and tended to crush minority voices. The individual, he insisted, must never concede matters of conscience or moral principle to the majority or to the state, which at best can be trusted to act according to simple expediency. His classic essay—which has inspired such reformers as Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—shows that transcendental individualism is not an anarchic stance but a morally demanding position with strong social implications.

## INDIVIDUALISM, SOCIETY, AND REFORM

Transcendentalism took many social forms. For more than four decades, Emerson's home in Concord was a magnet for friends, collaborators, and admirers. Several like-minded intellectuals formed the Transcendental Club in Cambridge in 1836, and besides holding stimulating meetings, they established *The Dial* (1840–1844), a journal of transcendentalist essays, poetry, and translations. The works of the major transcendentalists express not an instinct for isolation but a complex dialectic between "Society and Solitude" (the title of Emerson's 1870 collection of essays). Thoreau's masterpiece *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), based on his two-year residence in the 10-by-15-foot house he built himself by the shore of Walden Pond, is not only a meditation on spirit and nature but also a probing commentary on friendship, village affairs, and technology. Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller (1810–1850) wrote the first great U.S. feminist work, "The Great Lawsuit" (1843; revised as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 1845), which appeals not simply for equal rights for women but for more fully realized women, men, and relationships between the sexes. "Male and female," she wrote, "represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. . . . There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (Myerson 2000, p. 418). Fuller addressed many other reform issues as a columnist for the *New York Tribune*. Thousands came to hear the radical Unitarian minister Theodore Parker (1810–1860) rail against slavery, poverty, and the subjugation of women and laborers. Living in an age of rising economic competition, urbanization, and geographical expansion, but in which spiritual values, political integrity, and human rights seemed to be losing ground, the Transcendentalists were concerned to restore spiritual and moral balance. Their insistence on character—on simplicity and integrity—was conservative; their condemnation of institutional evil and hypocrisy was radical.

Although there were elements in the transcendental tradition that emphasized an inward-looking, contem-

### Selection From "New England Reformers," by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1844)

The world is awaking to the idea of union, and these experiments show what it is thinking of. It is and will be magic. Men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power, when once they are united; as in a celebrated experiment, by expiration and respiration exactly together, four persons lift a heavy man from the ground by the little finger only, and without sense of weight. But this union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated. It is the union of friends who live in different streets or towns. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union, the smaller and the more pitiful he is. But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member, and, to the astonishment of all, the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke. Government will be adamant without any governor. The union must be ideal in actual individualism.

Source: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "New England Reformers." (1844). Essays: *Second Series*. Retrieved February 20, 2003, from <http://www.emersoncentral.com/newengland.htm>

plative stance, most transcendentalists were intensely engaged with a variety of social reforms. Reform, they generally agreed, began with the individual and could not be imposed successfully on society by external means. But the principle of self-reliance, far from conferring license to withdraw from the affairs of the world, carried a compelling moral logic: The good life entails the cultivation one's mind and talents and the unfettered flowering of one's nature. All people being endowed with the same inherent dignity and nature, it followed that institutional forces thwarting human growth are evil and must be removed. Channing had actively opposed slavery, and Emerson and Thoreau became outspoken abolitionists. Transcendentalists also fought for rights for women and Native Americans as well as for education reform and more humane treatment of society's dispossessed, including the blind, the deaf, the insane, criminals, and even animals.

## COMMUNITARIAN EXPERIMENTS

Communitarianism, which is seemingly at the opposite end of the reform spectrum from individualism, also engaged some prominent Transcendentalists in two social experiments. Fruitlands was established in rural Harvard, Massachusetts, in June 1843 by philosopher and educator Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) and English reformer Charles Lane (1800–1870). Their

## Selection From Henry David Thoreau's *Wild Fruits* (1860)

What sort of a country is that where the huckleberry fields are private property? When I pass such fields on the highway, my heart sinks within me. I see a blight on the land. Nature is under a veil there. I make haste away from the accursed spot. Nothing could deform her fair face more. I cannot think of it ever after but as the place where fair and palatable berries are converted into money, where the huckleberry is desecrated. It is true, we have as good a right to make berries private property as to make wild grass and trees such; it is no worse than a thousand other practices which custom has sanctioned; but that is the worst of it, for it suggests how bad the rest are and to what result our civilization and division of labor naturally tend.

Source: Thoreau, Henry David. (1844). *Wild Fruits*. Retrieved February 20, 2003, from <http://www.walden.org/thoreau/default.asp?MFRAME=/thoreau/writings/fruits>.

dream of an agrarian utopia chastened by rigorous asceticism foundered after only seven months, the result of near total ignorance of farming, refusal to exploit animals for farm labor, and the self-indulgent eccentricities of the dozen participants. Alcott's famous daughter Louisa May, who turned eleven while living at Fruitlands, satirized the venture in "Transcendental Wild Oats" (1873), incisively depicting the human foibles of the reformers while lovingly defending her father's naïve idealism. A longer-lived and relatively successful communitarian venture was Brook Farm, established in 1841 by a former Unitarian minister, George Ripley (1802–1880), and his wife, Sophia (1803–1861), in West Roxbury, a few miles southwest of Boston. The objective was to relieve members of the destructive effects of a competitive society, readjusting the balance between "intellectual and manual labor" so that all people would enjoy "a more simple and wholesome life" (Myerson 2000, p. 308). Eventually the community adopted more elaborate organizational principles. Brook Farm attracted the interest (though not the participation) of Emerson and Thoreau, the active engagement of Fuller, and the early investment and involvement of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), who later drew on the experience for his ambivalent, complexly satirical novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Boasting about one hundred residents at its

peak, Brook Farm provided members with a stimulating intellectual and social life, successfully manufactured shoes and other products for sale outside the community, and operated a renowned school. It might have endured had not a tragic fire destroyed the unfinished—and uninsured—Phalanstery, a dormitory designed to house up to four hundred people. Brook Farm was dissolved in 1847.

## LEGACY

The transcendentalists gave eloquent expression to the value of individualism. Subsequent generations have often perverted the concept of self-reliance to justify jingoistic adventures, predatory business practices, and more vapid forms of self-interest. In their writings and public actions, however, the transcendentalists energized the Age of Reform (c. 1830–c. 1865), insisting that genuine individualism is implicitly moral and civic minded. Real self-reliance was sorely needed, wrote Emerson, to "renovate life and our social state" (Myerson 2000, p. 332).

—Wesley T. Mott

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## TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES

"Globalization" has become common parlance in the media, among scholars and in everyday conversation. But what does this actually mean in people's everyday lives, in particular for the new wave of immigrants who have come to the United States in recent years, during which the country has seen an immense influx of immigrants? One way to understand this prob-