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Transcendental Ideas: Definitions



An Overview of American Transcendentalism Martin Bickman, University of Colorado

Although Transcendentalism as a historical movement was limited in time from the mid 1830s to the late 1840s and in space to eastern Massachusetts, its ripples continue to spread through American culture. Beginning as a quarrel within the Unitarian church, Transcendentalism's questioning of established cultural forms, its urge to reintegrate spirit and matter, its desire to turn ideas into concrete action developed a momentum of its own, spreading from the spheres of religion and education to literature, philosophy, and social reform. While Transcendentalism's ambivalence about any communal effort that would compromise individual integrity prevented it from creating lasting institutions, it helped set the terms for being an intellectual in America.

It is easier to note its pervasive influence, though, than it is to clarify its doctrines. The fluidity and elusiveness of Transcendentalism was registered even by some of its most intelligent contemporaries. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, writes: "He is German by birth, and is called Giant Transcendentalist, but as to his form, his features, his substance, and his nature generally, it is the chief peculiarity of this huge miscreant that neither he for himself nor anybody for him has ever been able to describe them. As we rushed by the cavern's mouth we caught a hasty glimpse of him, looking somewhat like an ill-proportioned figure but considerably more like a heap of fog and duskiness. He shouted after us, but in so strange a phraseology that we knew not what he meant, nor whether to be encouraged or affrighted." [from "[The Celestial Railroad](#)" 

clergyman noted that "a new philosophy has risen, maintaining that nothing is everything in general, and everything is nothing in particular."

While [contextual] quotations imply that Transcendentalism had a language problem compounded of foreign borrowings and oracular jargon, the underlying difficulty in comprehension is that it was both a cause and a result of a major paradigm shift in epistemology, in conceptualizing how the mind knows the world, the divine, and itself. [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), its leading exponent, described both this shift and the derivation of the movement's name thus: "It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms." [from "[The Transcendentalist](#)"] Transcendentalism, then, is not as much concerned with a metaphysics that transcends our daily lives but rather with a new view of the mind that replaces Locke's empiricist, materialistic, and passive model with one emphasizing the role of the mind itself in actively shaping experience. Against Locke's claim that there is nothing in the mind not first put there through the senses, the Transcendentalists answer with Leibnitz, yes, nothing except the mind itself. But while Kant emphasized the power of the mind he also stressed its limits, its inability to know reality absolutely. The Transcendentalist vision went beyond Kant in insisting that the mind can apprehend absolute spiritual truths directly without having to go through the detour of the senses, without the dictates of past authorities and institutions, and without the plodding labor of ratiocination. In this sense particularly, it was the logical-or supralogical-extension of both the Protestant reformation and American democratic individualism.

To grasp the significance of this paradigm shift, we have to understand how dominant, even hegemonic, Lockean thought was in America, and particularly at Harvard College through the 1830s, where most of the male Transcendentalists were educated. For example Edward Everett, who exemplified, along with William Ellery Channing and Andrews Norton, the venerated group of Unitarian ministers and public men who taught the generation of transcendentalists, impressed his Harvard peers as a student by reciting verbatim throughout several class periods [Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding](#) 🌐. Here matter melded with method, since the chief instructional medium at Harvard and throughout American education was the "recitation," where knowledge was demonstrated by replicating the words of the lesson without necessarily showing any operational mastery. The Unitarians used Locke both negatively, to undermine the orthodox Calvinist belief in original sin--if the mind is a blank slate at birth it cannot be

innately depraved--and positively, to underwrite belief in the special dispensation of Christianity through the evidence of Jesus's miracles, sensory testimony of his spiritual power, the flesh testifying to the word.

So while Unitarianism was more optimistic and rationalistic than the orthodoxy it reformed, it weakened the foundation of Protestant faith by giving more authority to what happens outside the individual conscience than within it and elevating matter over spirit in shaping the mind. The Transcendentalists, in turn, took advantage of the multiple meanings of "idealism" as both an epistemology and as a moral and social critique of the "materialism" underlying the Unitarian alliance of commercial and religious interests, an alliance called by Emerson in another generalizing pun the "Establishment," stressing its static nature, contrasted with the Transcendentalist "Movement," a word suggesting youth, flux, and novelty.

An early challenge to the Unitarian synthesis came from a Swedenborgian, Sampson Reed, who in a Harvard M.A. speech in 1821 and a pamphlet, [Observations on the Growth of the Mind](#) (1826), posited a more organic unfolding of the mind's powers, at once romantic and apocalyptic: "There is a unison of spirit and nature. The genius of the mind will descend, and unite with the genius of the rivers, the lakes, and the woods." Ironically an even stronger challenge was from a Calvinist, James Marsh, who in 1829 published an American edition of [Coleridge's](#) Aids to Reflection, the very title of which emphasizes not only a new epistemological doctrine but an entirely different approach to spiritual knowledge, a turning inward to our own mental drama as the bedrock of religious truth. Marsh, who tried to enact this vision educationally as president of the University of Vermont, added his own "Preliminary Essay," underscoring the distinction between "the understanding," that distinctly Lockean faculty of rationalizing from the senses and "the Reason," those higher intuitions valued not only by German idealists but by mystics through the ages. Soon afterward, [Henry Hedge](#), a Unitarian minister equally conversant with German thought, wrote for that denomination's journal, The Christian Examiner, a laudatory article on Coleridge that Emerson declared "a living leaping Logos." Hedge, later to be one of the first members of the informal [Transcendentalist Club](#) that began in 1836 and met most frequently on his visits to Boston from his Maine congregation, soon faded from the forefront of the movement through his own caution about changing the structure of the church. He later described himself as "ecclesiastically conservative, though intellectually radical."

The issues were soon taken up by more activist Unitarian ministers such as [Orestes Brownson](#), who was influenced as much by French writers like Victor Cousin and Benjamin Constant as by English and German ones. In an 1834 Christian Examiner article, Brownson made a crucial link between the new epistemology and the limiting temporality and instrumentality of all cultural forms, including those of religion: "Every positive form, however satisfactory it

may be for the present, contains a germ of opposition to future progress. It contracts, by the very effect of its duration, a stationary character, that refuses to follow the intellect in its discoveries, and the soul in its emotions." Two years later [George Ripley](#) and Henry Furness would specifically question the Unitarian stress on Christ's miracles as opposed to more personally inward and universally moral validations of Christianity. Emerson stated this position most eloquently in his "[Divinity School Address](#)" of 1838: "But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain." Andrews Norton soon labeled the Transcendentalist position "[the Latest Form of Infidelity](#)." Heeding his own words that "there is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding," Emerson refused to become entangled in the ensuing theological debates led on the Transcendentalist front first by Ripley and then by Theodore Parker. While these two ministers had youthful energy and wide learning on their side, they soon found themselves embattled and isolated within the institution as pulpit exchanges were refused and social pressures mounted.

The controversy within the church was paralleled by another conflict between the Establishment and the Movement in the field of education. [Bronson Alcott](#), one of the few non-ministerial Transcendentalists and a self-taught teacher who had run other innovative schools in his native rural Connecticut, opened in 1834 near the Boston Common his Temple School. Alcott translated Transcendentalism into pedagogy by having the students shape and share their own thoughts in discussions and journals, instead of rote memory and textbook recitation. Language was seen as not simply a skill but the bridge between the individual soul and the physical and social worlds, so that lessons on vocabulary and grammar were integrated with spiritual matters.

[Elizabeth Peabody](#), Alcott's usually unpaid assistant, brought the school to the attention of the larger public in her 1835 *Record of a School*, but the stormclouds did not break until Alcott published under his own name in 1836-37 two volumes of her transcriptions of his *Conversations with Children on the Gospels*. Although the explicit outcry was against Alcott's discussions with young children of physical birth--Andrews Norton, again in the forefront of reaction, called it "one-third absurd, one-third blasphemous, and one-third obscene"--the underlying challenge was to the very structures of church and secular authority. By granting a Neoplatonic/Wordsworthian spiritual wisdom to the young, Alcott's practice threatened to invert the normal flow of teaching from adult to child, clergy to laity, institution to individual. Again, a reversion to a more primitive and protestant Christianity was seen as subversively to established Christianity. Despite Emerson's defense in the newspapers, Alcott's student body dwindled and he was never to be a classroom teacher again. He did go on to pioneer, along with [Margaret Fuller](#) and Peabody herself, that uniquely Transcendentalist form of adult education, the [Conversation](#), where the interplay of the participants' minds

becomes more important than any specific doctrine, process more important than product. Through means like these and Elizabeth Peabody's founding of the Kindergarten movement in postbellum America, Transcendentalist education went underground only [to]become a constant progressive current in American education.

The Transcendentalists, then, lost their immediate skirmishes within the Unitarian church and the field of education, however much their ideas were later to shape both these institutions. An alternative strategy was to extrapolate Transcendentalist ideas in a world outside these spheres, and no one did this more expansively than Margaret Fuller. She applied the notions of self-reliance and equality to gender roles in the first significant feminist essay in America, published in 1844 in [The Dial](#), the Transcendentalist journal she edited and helped found in 1840. Later, the piece was expanded to the book [Woman in the Nineteenth Century](#) (1845). She then left New England scene completely to become first literary reviewer and then reporter on social issues for the New York Tribune, finally widening her circle even beyond America to become involved in the failed Italian revolution of 1848 and dying soon thereafter in a tragic shipwreck.

The largest organized secession, though, from Boston Unitarianism and its values was the communitarian experiment in rural living known as [Brook Farm](#), initiated by George Ripley in 1841. The goal was to unite the mind with the hand, and eliminate the corresponding invidious distinctions between classes in society. Everyone participated in farm work and its excellent school on the premises underlined the pedagogical nature of the entire enterprise. There was a tension, however, between Transcendentalism's spontaneous anti-formalism and the prescriptive systematic dictates of the French utopian thinker [Fourier](#) which were increasingly taken as blueprints. Even before a disastrous and uninsured fire the community's vision thus became blurred, and ended in 1847. Despite its demise and that of the even smaller, shorter-lived [Fruitlands](#) community of Bronson Alcott, the notion of a pastoral retreat of simplicity and cooperation confronting by example the capitalist industrialism of the larger society became fixed in the American imagination.

Brook Farm threw into relief a basic tension in Transcendentalism between joint action and individual development. At one pole, Emerson and Thoreau, who both declined to be Brook Farmers, felt that improvement must begin with the self, that many of the specific reforms rampant in Jacksonian America such as prohibition and vegetarianism were too narrowly conceived and that to engage in social and political action was to dissipate creative energies. On the other side were Brownson, Peabody, and, intermittently Alcott, who felt that rampant individualism was part of the problem, not part of the solution, and that social change could be effected only through social means. But even Emerson and

Thoreau recognized that when evils such as slavery and imperialistic war reach a certain enormity, one must speak out and act, and they, along with other Transcendentalists, most notably Theodore Parker, joined the abolitionist cause.

Well before the firebell of the Civil War, Transcendentalism as a living force seemed to be extinguished as quickly as it flared up. As Perry Miller pointed out: "Parker killed himself with overwork, and Thoreau expended himself; Emerson dissolved into aphasia, Ripley subsided into disillusion, Hedge became a Harvard professor. . . Brownson became a Catholic, as did Sophia Ripley, and Elizabeth Peabody became a 'character.'" There were a number of younger and secondary figures such as Franklin Sanborn and Thomas Wentworth Higginson who perpetuated the movement through their memoirs and their own actions-- Sanborn ran a progressive school in Concord, Higginson encouraged women such as Emily Dickinson to write--but the energy was gone and the social forms--clubs, periodicals like The Western Literary Messenger and The Dial, schools and communes--had in proper Transcendentalist fashion self-destructed.

What did remain as a living movement was the ongoing effect of Transcendentalism in literature and philosophy. Most of the Transcendentalists were writers: they wrote voluminous personal journals, sermons, letters, manifestoes, poems, translations, and essays. Of this, perhaps only Emerson's essays and Thoreau's Walden were in the highest artist rank, but taken together the body of writings imply a theory of language. As often the most influential formulations are in the works of Emerson. In that epitome of Transcendentalism, Nature (1836), Emerson posits language as originating in names for natural objects which, through the doctrine of correspondences, have intrinsic spiritual and symbolic significance. Thus, every word was once a poem, or, more specifically, a metaphor, since it combines a sensory meaning with a more intangible or psychological one, the "natural fact" conveying a corresponding "spiritual fact." But the sensory component of language begins to fade through use, as language entropically drifts towards abstraction, and becomes only a set of one dimensional verbal counters that buffers us from immediate perception of the inner and outer worlds. The truly creative writer is one who can "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things," liberating us from the most pervasive and imprisoning of cultural forms, the categories of ordinary language. Emerson thus rescues the creative writer from the belletristic margins of American society to the epistemological center where the husks of old meanings are discarded and new ones made.

This aesthetic of deconstructing conventional language to open the doors of perception, of using fresh concrete description that at the same time has symbolic resonance, was internalized by writers who reject any trace of Transcendentalist metaphysics like Ernest Hemingway and William Carlos Williams ("No ideas but in things"). It particularly shaped American poetry,

especially when joined with Emerson's rejection of traditional poetic forms in favor of each utterance creating its own appropriate form, "a metre-making-argument. . . a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own." While Emerson himself and the younger poets he directly nurtured like [Jones Very](#), a mad Harvard tutor, and [Ellery Channing](#), the ne'er do well nephew of [William Ellery Channing](#), formulator of American Unitarianism, were unable to make a successfully break from regular forms, [Walt Whitman](#) and [Emily Dickinson](#) in widely different ways created poetic forms that are an extension of content. Between them they helped modern poetry find its most compelling subject in its embrace of the common, in grasping the immediacies of our lives with a visionary intensity so that facts flower into truths, in Thoreau's phrase. Transcendentalism also remains a shaping force at the heart of American philosophy, but unlike its role in literature, its centrality to American philosophy has only recently been argued, by contemporary philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Cornel West. To trace this lineage more precisely, we can return to [Nature](#), which begins with a distinction between the ME and the NOT ME. Any reader of German philosophy would then predict that through a long series of dialectical manipulations of abstract propositions the two turn out to be identical, two faces of the same unitary reality. But Emerson takes a different road and immediately collapses the distinction through a direct personal experience, that of crossing a bare common and becoming "a transparent eye-ball" instead of simply an "I." Later in the work Emerson pulls back from monistic Idealism not because it is false but because it disparages nature and leaves no Other to love. Both this privileging of direct experience over coherent system-building and this weighing of philosophical propositions not by their truth value but by how best they help us live were to be developed later in the century by William James and John Dewey in America's most crucial contribution to philosophy, Pragmatism. Both Transcendentalism and Pragmatism articulate and conceptualize peculiarly American dispositions towards knowing, as Daniel Boorstin writes: "We sometimes forget how gradual was the 'discovery' of America; it was a by-product of the occupation of the continent. To act, to move on, to explore also meant to push back the frontiers of knowledge; this inevitably gave a practical and dynamic character to the very idea of knowledge. To learn and to act became one." This vision is at the center of Emerson's 1838 address, ["The American Scholar,"](#) which reunifies divisions that have plagued western philosophy such as contemplation vs. action, soul vs. body, concept vs. specific object. The Transcendentalists and Pragmatists viewed knowledge and cultural forms not as perpetual truths but as temporary constructions, and insisted that all such constructions be open to the tests of continuing experience, that we put more faith in the mind's ability to order the world moment by moment than in complete and self-enclosed systems.

For this reason Transcendentalism remains in American life less as a specific doctrine--no one now calls oneself a "Transcendentalist"--than as presiding spirit

behind many movements that resisting [sic] the dominant culture. The writings of Thoreau, for example, shaped both the passive resistance methods of the civil rights movement and the underlying vision of the ecology movement. Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody are role models for feminist intellectuals who also espouse activism. The Transcendentalist efforts in education were reincarnated both in Dewey' laboratory school and the open school movement of the 1970s, and Brook Farm was the prototype of many of the communes of this same period. At its core, Transcendentalism was a youth movement, making eloquently obvious one of the first generation gaps in American history. Emerson wrote, "This deliquium, this ossification of the soul, is the Fall of Man. The redemption is lodged in the heart of youth," and went on to contrast the Party of Hope with the Party of Memory. Based on the foundational American assumption that the future can be better than the past through imagination and effort, the Transcendentalists envisioned a culture that would foster further acts of culture-making, a community that would also liberate the individual, a way of thinking that would also become a way of doing.