

# Transcendentalism and Social Reform

by Philip F. Gura

Those Americans who have heard of American Transcendentalism associate it with the writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau. Asked to name things about the group they remember, most mention Emerson's ringing declaration of cultural independence in his "American Scholar" address at Harvard's commencement in 1837 and his famous lecture "Self-Reliance," in which he declared that "to be great is to be misunderstood"; Thoreau's two-year experiment in self-sufficiency at Walden Pond and his advice to "Simplify! Simplify!"; and the minister Theodore Parker's close association with the radical abolitionist John Brown. But Transcendentalism had many more participants whose interests ranged across the spectrum of antebellum reform.[1]

To understand it fully, however, one must consider its origins.

Transcendentalism's roots were in American Christianity. In the 1830s young men training for the liberal Christian (Unitarian) ministry chafed at their spiritual teachers' belief in Christ's miracles, claiming instead that his moral teachings alone were sufficient to make him an inspired prophet.[2] Similarly, they rejected the widely accepted notion that man's knowledge came primarily through the senses. To the contrary, they believed in internal, spiritual principles as the basis for man's comprehension of the world. These formed the basis of the "conscience" or "intuition" that made it possible for each person to connect with the spiritual world. When man thus moved above or beyond—"transcended"—the cares and concerns of the mundane, lower sphere, he was in touch with and lived through this spiritual principle, what Ralph Waldo Emerson termed the "Oversoul." [3]

At its core, Transcendentalism celebrated the divine equality of each soul. There was no arbitrary division between saved and damned, for anyone could have a transcendent experience and thereafter live his life connected to the spiritual world. Transcendentalism thus seemed the ideal philosophy for a nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and have the same inalienable rights. In this, the movement began to overlap with antebellum efforts toward social reform, for if all men and women were spiritually equal from birth, they all deserved to be treated with social and political equality as well.

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Because of this basic belief, many Transcendentalists became involved in efforts to reverse conditions that prevented individuals from realizing their full potential. For example, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott's father, began the Temple School, an educational experiment for elementary-age children that stressed their innate divinity and encouraged its early discovery and cultivation. He had to close the school after parents objected to how Alcott taught the Gospels. Alcott's assistant there, Elizabeth Peabody, went on to pioneer the kindergarten movement in the United States. Orestes Brownson, son of Vermont farmers and one of the few Transcendentalists not college-educated, remained loyal to his roots and dedicated his life to improving the conditions of the working class; his statements on the likelihood of class warfare between laborer and owner anticipated those of Karl Marx.



*Portraits of American Transcendentalists (clockwise from top left): George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Peabody (Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

Other Transcendentalists moved directly toward what we would recognize today as socialism. Brownson's close friend George Ripley resigned from his Unitarian pulpit near the Boston waterfront and started the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education. Through this utopian experiment in communal living he tried to break down the barriers between intellectuals and laborers, and divided the community's profits according to socialist principles. At Brook Farm members rotated through different forms of work, the most educated having their turn at farming, husbandry, and crafts, and common laborers given the opportunity to engage in art, music, drama, and other activities to which they had been little exposed.[4] Alcott, seeking a new project after the failure of the Temple School, began the quixotic Fruitlands experiment in Harvard, Massachusetts, where he and a handful of other idealists sought to live as vegetarians, giving up even shoe leather and beasts of burden in their respect for all life. The "community" did not last through its first autumn.[5]

In another arena, Margaret Fuller, influenced by Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance, became the foremost advocate of women's rights in her day. Her pioneering *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), in which she argued, on Transcendentalist principles, the economic and psychological equality of the sexes, influenced many Transcendentalists and others. Not afraid to put her principles into operation, she later traveled to Europe to report on the political and social revolutions of 1848 for Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune*; she and her husband, an Italian count, died in a shipwreck sailing from Europe to the United States in 1850.

For some, such reform activities were the natural outgrowth of Transcendentalist thought, and they made social reform virtually the entire focus of their Transcendentalism. Until the 1840s Emerson was not the de facto leader of the group. Rather, the most visible members of the loosely associated group were Ripley and Brownson, both of whom stressed social engagement in their Unitarian ministries in Boston.

The impoverished, the mentally and physically challenged, the imprisoned and those otherwise institutionalized, and the enslaved: Transcendentalists recognized these members of society as their equals in spirituality, and America's promise would not be fulfilled until the benefits of its citizenship were available to all. Ripley's Brook Farm was the most dramatic attempt to resolve the inequities in the mundane world. He abandoned his ministry among middle-class Bostonians in large measure because his congregation was content in their comfort and felt no compulsion to extend understanding and charity in the way their minister wished. Similarly, Brownson, appalled at what he saw as the rapidly deteriorating social condition of the working class, first started his own reformist periodical, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, and then embraced Roman Catholicism, whose ethic of brotherhood he believed better served the impoverished and oppressed.

Ripley's and Brownson's centrality began to fade when Emerson emerged as a major Transcendentalist spokesperson in the wake of the furor over his "Divinity School Address" (1838), when he insulted the Harvard theological faculty by claiming that their preaching was uninspired, and the publication of his first book of essays three years later. In these and other works he provided Transcendentalists another way to define and act on their beliefs, one that revolved around his glorification of the individual rather than active engagement in social reform. Emerson, for example, never joined Brook Farm, although his close friend and cousin Ripley implored him to do so, aware that Emerson's participation would bring the experiment even more attention. He wrote Ripley a blunt refusal, explaining that he still had far to travel on his own personal, spiritual journey before he could get so directly involved with other the reformation of others' lives. Allied with Emerson in this belief that self-reform trumped social engagement was his disciple Henry Thoreau and, for a while, Margaret Fuller. Both stressed the importance of individual responsibility and attention to one's own conscience rather than amelioration of others' conditions, potentially a distraction from self-improvement.

This split among Transcendentalists did not go unremarked. Peabody, for example, wondered if Emerson's stress on self-reliance and individual fulfillment might not lead to what she termed "ego-theism," his setting up himself, or comparably inspired individuals, as somehow gods themselves. She concluded that when one held such self-centered views as Emerson did, "faith commit[ed] suicide" when an individual failed to realize that "man proves but a melancholy God" in comparison to the divine being whom she still worshipped.[6] Similarly, after reading Emerson's *Essays: First Series*, one of Fuller's protégés, Caroline Healey (Dall) thought that what he had to say about self-reliance was "extravagant and unsafe." [7] Another of Emerson's friends, Henry James Sr., echoed this criticism. "The curse of our present times, which eliminates all their poetry," he observed of his contemporaries' resistance to socialism, is the "selfhood imposed on us by the evil world." [8]

Emerson himself recognized the conflict. Asked to speak at a memorial for the great reformer Theodore Parker, who had died on the threshold of the Civil War, he demurred, remarking how different they were in their approaches to the problems of the age. "Our differences of method and working," he wrote to the organizing committee of the memorial, were "such as really required and honored all [Parker's] Catholicism and magnanimity to forgive in me." In the privacy of his journal, he was even more candid. "I can well praise him [but only] at a spectator's distance, for our minds & methods were unlike—few people more unlike." [9]

Through the 1840s this division persisted among Transcendentalists and associated groups, but in the next decade it gradually ceased to be of great significance. After the signal year 1850, in which Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law, all parties pulled away from internecine squabbling as the sectional crisis challenged all Americans to confront the immense problem of chattel slavery. Transcendentalists who had advanced social reforms that included efforts to increase rights for women, labor, and the indigent redirected their energies toward extinguishing the institution of slavery.

Theodore Parker was the leader in this fight, but he was a special case, for even as he vociferously condemned the Southern slaveholders and the politicians they elected (and any northerners complicit with them), he continued to preach about the great inequities of wealth in cities like Boston. He understood the connections between northern businessmen and southern slaveholders, and declared worship of Mammon—or wealth—the evil. In one sermon he told his audience that he was speaking in a city "whose most popular idol is mammon, the God of God; whose Trinity is a Trinity of Coin!" "The Eyes of the North are full of cotton," he continued. "They see nothing else, for a web is before them; their ears are full of cotton, and they hear nothing but the buzz of their mills; their mouth is full of cotton, and they can speak audibly but two words—Tariff, Tariff, Dividends, Dividends." [10] He genuinely worried that liberty might fail. If men continued to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law, he said, he did not know when the struggle would end but did not care if the Union went to pieces.

Other Transcendentalists were similarly swept up in this fervor, believing slavery the great evil to be extinguished before all others. Many women who hitherto had devoted themselves to women's rights were swayed by such arguments and believed that their turn for equality would come after the African Americans'. Unfortunately, in this they were disappointed. Speaking of the Transcendentalists' commitment to abolition in the 1850s, the Unitarian clergyman Octavius Brooks Frothingham explained in 1876 why they and others were so quick to put aside other pressing issues. He recalled that in the 1850s the "agitation against slavery had taken hold of the whole country; it was in politics, in journalism, in literature, in the public hall and parlor." [11]

When the Civil War was over, what became of the movement? Some of its leaders did not even live to see the end of the war, most notably Parker, Thoreau, and Fuller. Others moved on to new causes. After

the failure of Brook Farm in the late 1840s, Ripley moved to New York City, replacing Fuller as book reviewer at Greeley's *Tribune*. Brownson became an apologist and proselytizer for Roman Catholicism. Peabody embraced the kindergarten movement and, later, Native American rights. That left Emerson as the public face of Transcendentalism.

There was some progress in the area of women's rights, with Caroline Healey Dall assuming Fuller's place as one of the intellectual leaders of the women's movement, and Brook Farm alumna Almira Barlow providing it new guidance. Ministers like John Weiss (Parker's disciple), David Wasson, and Samuel Johnson, however, defended Transcendentalism against the rise of the scientific method that placed most value on material facts rather than spiritual ideals. Few Transcendentalists, however, were involved in the growing disputes between labor and capital, the reformation of asylums and penitentiaries, or other matters on a reformist agenda.

By the 1870s, the uneasy balance between the self and society that had characterized the antebellum phase of the Transcendental movement tipped irrevocably in the direction of the self. The intellectual power of Transcendentalists was directed toward individual rights and, implicitly, market capitalism, not humanitarian reform. Emerson's admittedly demanding philosophy of self-reliance, an artifact of the early 1840s, was simplified and adopted as a chief principle. More and more, people identified Transcendentalism with the idea of individualism alone, rather than with the ethic of brotherhood that was supposed to accompany it, a process that only accelerated after Emerson's death in 1882. It was left to others to promulgate a religion, the Social Gospel, that reached out to the poor and forgotten.

The New York Unitarian clergyman and erstwhile Transcendentalist Samuel Osgood summed this up well. Reacting to a suggestion that in the 1870s Transcendentalism had lost its relevance, he argued that the group's very success in spreading its ideas had made their philosophy less visible. "The sect of Transcendentalists has disappeared," he wrote, "because their light has gone everywhere."<sup>[12]</sup> He meant that American culture had absorbed Emerson's most distinctive thought, the deification of the individual. With more hindsight, however, one might argue differently. Emerson's fame presaged, ironically, the death knell of the higher principle of universal brotherhood for which Transcendentalism, more than any other American philosophy, might have provided the foundation.

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[1] Philip F. Gura, in *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007) offers a thorough brief overview of the subject.

[2] William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendental Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), is still the best source for the religious roots of the controversy between younger and older Unitarians.

[3] Emerson makes the distinction between the Reason and Understanding in his "Divinity School Address" of 1838. He speaks of the Oversoul in 1841 in the essay by that name.

[4] See Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[5] See Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[6] Elizabeth Peabody, "Egotheism, the Atheism of Today" (1858), reprinted in *idem.*, *Last Evening with Allston and Other Papers* (Boston: D. Lathrop, 1886), 3.

[7] Helen R. Deese, ed., *Selected Journals of Carline Healey Dall*, in *Massachusetts Historical Society, Collections* 90 (2006), 81.

[8] Henry James, *Moralism and Christianity; or, Man's Experience and Destiny* (New York: Redfield, 1850), 84.

[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson to Moncure Daniel Conway, June 6, 1860, in Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton, *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939–1995), 5: 221; and Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman, et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960–1982), 14: 352–353.

[10] Theodore Parker, *A Sermon of War* (1846) in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, ed. Frances Power Cobbe, 12 vols. (London: Trüber, 1863–1865), 4: 5–6, 25.

[11] Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (New York: Putnam, 1876), 331.

[12] Samuel Osgood, "Transcendentalists in New England," *International Review* 3 (1876), 761.

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**Philip F. Gura** is the William S. Newman Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His books include *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in nonfiction, *Jonathan Edwards: America's Evangelical* (2005), and *The Wisdom of Words: Language, Theology, and Literature in the New England Renaissance* (1981).

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