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## EMERSON & TRANSCENDENTALISM

1. The Puritan notion of inherited sin or natural depravity--mid-17<sup>th</sup> century--gets replaced at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by John Locke's passive theory of mind (character is not theologically essential, but a product of external stimuli forming impressions on the tabula rasa/blank slate of mind).
2. Thus, psychological interiority becomes less "weighty" in terms of guilt; Ben Franklin's habit chart suggests character is malleable.
3. I argue that this malleable self was/is subject to micro-guilt/discipline and easily seduced by consumerism—a self possessed by goods.
4. Backlash against the secularism of 2 and 3, however, also in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century leads to evangelical movements/Quakers in which you, your Bible, and solitude commune (i.e. a return to Protestant/Puritan interiority, but less dark).
5. 4 above plus the Ideal philosophy of the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant leads (for some intellectuals and artists) to a sense that the mind has primary or significant agency: the world is shaped by imagination/interiority as much as interiority is a product of exterior, introjected sensations.
6. The power of the subjective imagination is the primary tenet of nearly all forms of Romanticism.
7. Detour one: Napoleon invades Egypt and the Rosetta stone is discovered [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta\\_Stone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone). When decoded in 1822, Romantics become obsessed with hieroglyphics and the meaning of writing/marks. If I write a bunch of aimless squiggles on the board (that's a joke) the marks are 3D materially present, but subjectively meaningless. If the marks get "decoded" and end up spelling "Volvo," in one sense the marks become materially not present as they dissolve from 3D status into non-3D meaning, and in another sense become more present as either a manifestation of what they represent, a physical car, or of the image of a car in your mind, the latter of which begs the question what is an "idea" in the mind.
8. Detour two: which do you prefer... ~ . +? Most will prefer the serpentine/curvy ~. It seems more "beautiful." Why? Where is "beauty"—in the landscape/the sculpting of a body, or in your mind, which conceives of beauty and projects it upon an object?
9. Romantics are haunted (which the above detours begin to tease out) by the tension between mentality and concrete, weighty "reality": since Descartes, mind/body dualism, or the mysterious intersection of non-dimensional thought and 3D reality is a problem.
10. Transcendentalism = an urbanite, self-conscious, radical literary/social movement of the late 1830s/40s, centered in Boston. Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller (and others, now less famous) hang out being geniuses together; they have their own literary/culture magazine, and Emerson is their intellectual/spiritual leader, whose lectures and essays make him famous in his own day in the U.S., England, and Europe. Poe, Dickinson, Whitman, and Melville (our other writers this

semester) are all American Romantics, but the latter term is an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century coinage. They are inspired by or react to Transcendentalism, but are not Transcendentalists per se.

11. The basic 2 ideas of Transcendentalism = a) you have a grand, potent interiority, but you don't know it (you are a god in ruin); and b) you should venerate nature rather than see it as a commodity to be exploited.

12. The above b would suggest Transcendentalists are forerunners of ecological stewardship, and there is some truth in that notion, especially in regards to Thoreau.

13. However, "nature" more often is used as part of a dialectic. Thus we get to Emerson in his essay "Nature."

14. Emerson begins by saying we need an original relationship to nature; we should not get things second-hand from previous generations. We need to see nature freshly, we need to be self-reliant, and we need to be iconoclastic (they were not hippies of their era, not really; but the analogy is useful in suggestion their imaginative radicalism).

15. Emerson continues on for several paragraphs with a lot of inspirational one-liners. The idea sequence does not seem very linear or logical, but rather more associative, circuitous, and emotive (all high energy; too much coffee, as it were!). But then who wants to use their daddy's logic?

16. Then he settles in, and poses a fundamental dichotomy between Self and non-Self/Nature. This will seem odd because he seemed to start with the proposition that we should bond with nature and he gets rhapsodic about it initially. Why is he reverting to the old mind/body problem? (Imagine a cartoon sequence: Mr. Forefather dictating the rules to burgeoning young metaphysician; next cartoon, metaphysician says not even his body is his body and etc., and so we are left with a world of objects, Volvos, trees, bodies, etc., and the self is reduced to a pinpoint of non-dimensionality).

17. Emerson thus far has been speaking inspirationally, metaphorically, and abstractly. Then, abruptly, he says he is walking through a field or in the woods (the "bare commons"). Now it is getting interesting, because whereas the essay up to this point has been non-tangible, Emerson locates himself in time and space walking across the "commons".

18. What happens in the famous "transparent eyeball" passage? Abruptly, just as he has incarnated himself in time and space, if you will, he has a peak experience that takes him out of time and space. The "mean-egotism" of self (all the gears in your head brooding about this and that) becomes absorbed by/subsumed by a larger spiritual self. He is "nothing" and "everything" at the same time. He is circumambient being. There is no subjective interior "I" looking upon an objective 3D world. The rupture between mind/body—THE problem of western metaphysics—is repaired because the distinction vanishes in a verbal/ecstatic sleight-of-hand.

19. Another way of putting it (and for those of you who find eastern religion attractive, take note!): the subjective "I" seeing the objective "world" collapses together. In the sentence, in effect, "I see the world" or "I am seeing the world," the "I" and "world" antipodes are replaced by a verb, the pure perceptual dynamism of "see" or "seeing". Emerson has become, in short, a cosmic verb! He is "being" not "a being" seeing "beings" (got it?!).

20. Try to draw a cartoon of 19 and the key passage. Contemporary journalists did, and mocked Emerson.

21. But, actually, he has been very crafty and coy in what above I called a dialectic. Emerson needs Nature to pull him away from bad sociality (daddy generations of stale, conventional thought, and so plants himself, physically, in the solitude of an empty field. But he goes into Nature only to transcend Nature. The dialectic, in this case, = Forefather rule-set... Nature... Nature transcended for cosmic being. So, when we say Emerson or Thoreau loves nature or that they are ecologically sensitive.... Yes, up to a point. But they really are just using nature as the middle-term in a psychological/metaphysical trajectory.

22. Back to being a verb. Sounds like fanciful professor talk. But let's translate the metaphysical epiphany or peak experience into the issue of liberty or power. Emerson wants absolute liberty and absolute power (no daddies, to continue the psychodynamic terminology); he wants to forget the "mean egotism" of a compromised life—the life of clock time, getting and spending, and living in accordance with bureaucratic minutiae.

23. This feeling (even if you don't buy into its metaphysical component) is something everyone achieves in rare moments of active excellence: when you perfectly put the basketball in the hoop or hit the baseball, when you dance with a partner and lose yourself in the dance, when you spontaneously laugh with large gestures, when you are in the grove, and feel a certain rhythmic pulse or whatever. You forget yourself, you become a verb verbing, and you feel free.

24. Emerson calls this feeling of partaking the "Oversoul" (the next essay). But do we not all desire this feeling and feel it, sometimes, in various ways?

25. That's good. But there is the bad, too. Emerson was fascinated by power, and strong men or geniuses (Shakespeare, but also Napoleon the conqueror of the better part of Europe nearly). Such powerful men (there are powerful women, too, of course; but note here I am introducing a masculinist side to Emerson, intermittently visible in his essays, although not the "Nature" or "Oversoul" essay very much) control/master history. They ARE History. They are self-reliant and not weak... they are uber-men, and there is a direct line from Emerson's thought to Nietzsche's thought: a fascination with the will exerting itself, perhaps leaving other, weaker wills, subordinate. Thus—and it is a paradox—Emerson the metaphysician ends up, at times, sounding very much like Ann Rand and her dopey fascination with Titans of Industry and etc. Note in the "Journals" how indifferent Emerson can be to the prospect of a welfare state.

26. The ugly. Emerson did, eventually, support Abolitionism. But he came to support it rather tardily to my mind, and certainly could have been a prime mover in the Abolitionist movement earlier. But, as he says in the "Journals": some are tasked to liberate those people in actual bondage (slaves); and some, himself, are tasked with liberating us from mind-slavery. Whether his metaphysics, in this regard, cloak a certain somewhat squeamish, patrician (Boston blue-blood) personality within radical inspirational sound-bites, I will leave for you to decide. Perhaps there is room for self-reform without social reform. When we get to Margaret Fuller, you will see some of the same inspirational metaphysics: but Fuller—it was a big scandal in her day—went to Europe, lived unmarried but sexually with an Italian revolutionary, nursed injured revolutionaries at great personal sacrifice, and so on: and Emerson, well, he turned a cold-shoulder to such boldness.