

American Romanticism  
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## TRANSCENDENTALISM AS A MOVEMENT

Intro:

- radical literary/social movement of the late 1830s/1840s
- mostly young, Boston-bred intellectuals
- Emerson, Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller most well-known

Basic idea: to awaken/liberate slumbering spiritual selves within; to glorify the consciousness and will; to recognize the infinitude of the individual.

Opposed to Lockean psychology/philosophy that still dominated mainstream thinking:

- John Locke's tabula rasa vs German Immanuel Kant's idea of the shaping power of the mind
- Transcendentalists also influenced by Plato (i.e. Idealism vs materialism)
- Transcendentalists also influenced by Indian/Eastern religions (cosmic soul, etc.)

Part of larger impulse of (self) reform:

- Old World corruption left behind; perhaps individuals and society perfectible in a new country
- also age of reform movements: abolition, temperance, women's rights, etc.
- Brook Farm: Transcendentalist socialist experiment in communal living in the 1840s

Part of Protestant tradition of dissent from encumbering Catholic Church dogma:

- Puritans emphasized individual encounter b/w man and God at the moment of regeneration
- although also into social conformity
- and tended to be spiritually aristocratic (only the "elect" get saved)

--for Transcendentalists:

- no inherited sin/ natural depravity
- all can embrace Truth/Divinity because it's already within one

Transcendentalists venerate Nature rather than see it as a resource to possess and exploit

## SOME QUOTES FROM SCHOLARS ON RALPH WALDO EMERSON

*"Putting Emerson aside, we cannot remember what we have read or if we have read anything."  
(Eric Cheyfitz)*

*"[For] Emerson ... Shakespeare is great not because he is superior to us but because he represents or symbolizes the writer in each of us. In honoring him, we honor ourselves." (Robert D. Richardson, Jr.)*

*"'Be yourself' meant to Emerson 'Be your potential self.'" (Stephen E. Whicher)*

*"Sin, for Emerson--the real and only sin--was 'limitation'--that is, contraction or loss of power." (Michael Lopez)*