Transcendentalism

Transcendental philosophy strongly influenced Henry David Thoreau's writing and provided the context in which he wrote Walden. Transcend means "to rise above" or "surpass" the normal limits of something. Transcendentalism is a philosophy that draws from religious traditions such as Protestantism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The concept of Transcendentalism proposes that humans have the ability to transcend the physical world. By relying on personal impressions and trusting one's own authority, a person can understand the world, and his or her place in it, in new ways.

Transcendentalism involves the following principles:

The divine waits here on Earth for people to perceive it.

All natural beings possess a spark of the divine.

Nature is inherently good and is humanity's best teacher.

People must trust their own intuition, not society's norms, to guide them.

Americans should look to their own history and culture for inspiration.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a New England essayist and lecturer, led the Transcendental movement. Emerson's essay, "Nature," published in 1836, sets forth the ideas that base Transcendentalism. The essay deals with the best way to understand God and nature: through direct experience. Society is detrimental to this process; to become one with nature, it is important that solitude becomes central to the experience. Emerson's celebrated 1841 essay "Self-Reliance" proved to be another major Transcendental document. In the essay Emerson stressed that individuals should trust their deepest instincts and that intuition is the main source of wisdom. He says that the truths gained through intuition are shared and recognized by others and are universal. Other leading Transcendentalists, along with Emerson and Thoreau, included Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, and the poet and philosopher Walt Whitman.

The Industrial Revolution and the Gold Rush

Henry David Thoreau and many other Americans in the 19th century witnessed what must have seemed to be inconceivably rapid changes. In short order the railroad, the telegraph, and factories revolutionized travel, communication, and production methods. These industrial advances also brought feelings of discontent to people who lived on farms, away from all the interesting new progress. The values of rural America began to seem quaint and unfashionable compared with urban life. Agricultural production began to seem less important than the manufacture of goods.

Rural Americans began to move to cities, seeking jobs in industry. As the Industrial Age developed, it required both workers and raw materials—lots of them. Lumber was needed for fuel and construction in the emerging urban landscape, making the woodcutting business a vast logging industry.

Because Walden documents living in the woods, Thoreau writes about the effects of deforestation. In Chapter 4, "Sounds," he makes poignant reference to the changes: "With such huge and lumbering civility the country hands a chair to the city." Most likely, the word lumbering is intentional wordplay. "All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city," he continues, describing the results of industrialization.

Thoreau also intensely cares about the use of wood as fuel in rural areas. With the century's advancing industrialization came actual wood shortages in rural areas, and the writer notes the remarkable "value ... still put upon wood even in this age" in "House-Warming." In his second winter at Walden Pond, Thoreau uses a coal-burning cookstove (more efficient than a fireplace) rather than logs "since I did not own the forest."

The railroads made the Gold Rush possible. In 1848 gold was discovered in California, and Thoreau did not welcome the discovery. As someone who strove for asceticism and purity, he hated the idea of people racing to California in search of quick riches. In an 1854 lecture Thoreau said, "The rush to California reflects the greatest disgrace on mankind."

Utopian Communities

The same century that saw the Gold Rush and a wholesale embrace of industrialism saw some Americans establish Utopian farms with the goal of "plain living and high thinking." Eighty such farms were established in 1840, but the one most important to Henry David Thoreau was Brook Farm.

In 1841 the Unitarian minister George Ripley established Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. Although Ripley was a religious man, Brook Farm was the first nonreligious commune of its day. Intellectual commune members decided that they would pool their labor in this simple, wholesome community to gain more time for studying and writing. Nathaniel Hawthorne and journalist Charles A. Dana were two of the original shareholders; Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott were two celebrated visitors; and the commune's weekly magazine, The Harbinger, featured essays by James

Russell Lowell and John Greenleaf Whittier. Brook Farm also established an excellent school for students from preschool through college-bound teens.

Brook Farm flourished briefly and then disbanded and faded away. A nearby commune, Fruitlands, seemed to have faded away before it even began. The goal of its founders, Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott, was that the community should be a self-sufficient farm. Unfortunately, neither man had any farming experience.

Fruitlands, established in Harvard, Massachusetts, encouraged extreme asceticism. Its members were forbidden meat, hot baths, artificial lighting, alcohol, cotton clothing (because cotton came from the slave-owning South), and even conjugal sex. The heaviest burden at Fruitlands was borne by Bronson Alcott's wife and their four daughters—including Louisa, who later wrote a withering roman à clef (text in which invented names are used in place of real names) about the farm. Although Charles Lane paid lip service to the idea of equality between the sexes, it seems that the Alcott females ended up doing most of the cooking and cleaning. Fruitlands collapsed after seven months, as soon as the weather started getting cold.

Brook Farm and Fruitlands may not have lasted as communities, but they both strongly influenced Thoreau's way of thinking. Both were principally guided by Transcendentalism. Both stressed detachment from worldly affairs and materialism. And both provided him with some of his few readers when his work began to be published. He was friendly with members at both places, though he said he would "rather keep bachelor's hall in hell" than live at either.