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The Phenomenon Transcendentalism and Its Impact on American and Other Literatures

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Abstract

Transcendentalism like any other movement or thought did not have any spontaneous birth and growth; rather its rise, growth and spread had been gradual and graceful as a reaction to the then prevailing ideologies which kept over emphasizing on rationalism. Though this movement took its inception as a religious reaction but its influence penetrated very soon in every gender not only of American but also European literatures. Some aspects of this movement related to its inception and impact are succinctly highlighted in this research.

Keywords: Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, ethical conduct, oriental impact, Unitarianism, miracles, idealism

Introduction

Transcendentalism which is generally regarded as a religious movement, prodigiously influenced the prevailing approaches and the scholars in the field of literature in American and around Europe. This movement incited the use of senses and stressed on the power of intuition. With its multidimensional influence, its birth cannot be regarded just a reaction or dissatisfaction to any particular field of literature or just the religion, rather its birth was the result of a reaction towards a particular approach. To have an

elaborative look into the transcendentalist ideology we, in this research, will try to have a comparative study of the transcendentalism with some other approaches.

The Rise of Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism took its birth in America around the second quarter of nineteenth century as the movement for the religious renewal and social transformation with ideas grounded in the claim that divine truth could be known intuitively. Transcendentalism is usually considered to be the vital and principal expression of romanticism in America. Many prominent reformers, writers and ministers of that era were associated with it, that include Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Margaret Fuller (1810–1850), and Theodore Parker (1810–1860)

Transcendentalism cannot be properly understood without knowing the context of Unitarianism, the dominant religion in Boston during the early nineteenth century so in the lines that follow we try to have a comparative look at the transcendental and Unitarian approaches.

Transcendentalism vs Unitarianism

Unitarianism developed during the late eighteenth century as a shoot of the liberal wing of Christianity, which had separated from Orthodox Christianity during the First Great Awakening of the 1740s. That Awakening, along with its successor, saw a brief period of revivalism. The Liberals tended to reject both the Orthodox belief and the emotionalism of the revivalists; on one side stood dogma, on the other stood "enthusiasm. The Unitarians descended as the Boston contingent of this tradition, while making their own unique theological contribution in rejecting the doctrine of divine trinity.

Chief Features of Unitarianism

The lines that follow include the fundamentals on which the Unitarianism stands.

Stress On Ethical Conduct And Intellectual Ability

Unitarians placed a significant stress on stability, harmony, rational thought, progressive morality, classical learning, and other hallmarks of the Enlightenment Christianity. They offered a philosophy promoting the importance of voluntary ethical conduct and the ability of the intellect to discern what constituted ethical conduct. There was a "natural theology" in which the individual could, through empirical investigation or the exercise of reason, discover the ordered and benevolent nature of the universe and of God's laws. Divine "revelation," which took its highest form in the Bible, was an external event or process that would confirm the findings of reason.

Bible, A Book Identical to Other Books

William Ellery Channing, in his landmark sermon "Unitarian Christianity" (1819) sounded the characteristic theme of optimistic rationality:

Leading principle of Unitarianism is that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. With these views of the

Bible, they take it their bounden duty to exercise reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths.

Rebellion against Unitarianism

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Unitarians effectively captured Harvard with the election of Rev. Henry Ware Sr. as Hollis Professor of Divinity in 1805 and of John Thorton Kirkland as President in 1810. It was at Harvard that most of the younger generation of Transcendentalists received their education, and it was here that their rebellion against Unitarianism began. However, *It would be a mistake to say that Transcendentalism entailed a rejection of Unitarianism; rather, it evolved almost as an organic consequence of its parent religion.*

The Transcendentalists felt that something was lacking in Unitarianism. Sobriety, mildness and calm rationalism failed to satisfy that side of the Transcendentalists which languish for a more intense spiritual experience. The source of the discontent that prompted Emerson to renounce the "corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College" is suggested by job description, where the professor's duties were to explain the existence of a first cause, to prove and illustrate his essential attributes, both naturally and morally, to discuss his improvidence and state, together with the belief of a future of rewards and punishments which also meant to derive and enforce the obligations which man is under to his Maker, together with the most important duties of social life, resulting from the several relations which men mutually bear to each other and lastly, this coincidence, to state the absolute necessity and vast cooperation of a divine disclosure.

Controversy over Miracles between Unitarians and Transcendentalists

The immediate controversy surrounded the question of miracles, or whether God communicated his existence to humanity through miracles as performed by Jesus Christ. The Transcendentalist Emerson raised the charge forcefully in his scandalous Divinity School Address (1838), asserting that, *"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."*

The same year, Harvard professor Andrews Norton's magnum opus *The Evidence of the Genuineness of the Four Gospels*, identified what he regarded as the odious implications of the Unitarian position: *"there is no revelation made from God to the human soul; we can know nothing of religion but what is taught us from abroad, by an individual raised up and specially endowed with wisdom from on high to be our instructor."*

To Norton, such a rejection of the existence of divine miracles, and the assertion of an intuitive communion with God, amounted to a rejection of Christianity itself. In his reply to the Transcendentalists, "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity," Norton wrote that their position

"strikes at root of faith in Christianity," and he reiterated the "orthodox" Unitarian belief that inner revelation was inherently unreliable and a potential lure away from the truths of religion.

The religion of which they speak, therefore, exists merely, if it exists at all, in undefined and unintelligible feelings, having reference perhaps to certain imaginations, the result of impressions communicated in childhood, or produced by the visible signs of religious belief existing around us, or awakened by the beautiful and magnificent spectacles which nature presents.

The miracles controversy revealed how far the Harvard rebels had grown from their theological upbringing. It opened a window onto the fundamental dispute between the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians, which centred around the relationship between God, nature and humanity. The heresy of the Transcendentalists (for which the early Puritans had hanged people) was to countenance mysticism and pantheism, or the beliefs in the potential of the human mind to commune with God and in a God who is present in all of nature, rather than unequivocally distinct from it. Nevertheless, the Transcendentalists continued to think of themselves as Christians and to articulate their philosophy within a Christian theological framework, although some eventually moved away from the past Christianity (as Emerson) or abandoned organized religion altogether. Emerson, in "Nature," tries to capture the feeling of conversion as experienced during his (or his narrator's) sojourn in the woods. In a famous passage that has become a classic yet frequently parodied description of the "transcendent moment," he writes:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

Influence of Transcendentalism on American literature

The impact of Transcendentalism on American literature can easily be seen today. Befitting example is Elizabeth Gilbert's best selling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the book, Gilbert goes on a journey both physically and spiritually. Recently divorced, she finds self-reliance. She comes to value the beauty of the everyday (pasta!). She meditates, hoping to connect with the 'Eternal One' within her.

The Transcendentalists were forceful critics of slavery and gender inequality. In transcendental theory, every individual has to be respected because every individual has a universal soul.

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

As we can see from the excerpt from „Walden“ by Henry Thoreau, 1854, It is equally difficult, as may now be seen more clearly than at the outset of our discussion, to separate the European and the American contributions to transcendentalism. That spirit of freedom, of individualism, of revolution, of romance, which was aboard throughout the Western world during this period, took on a peculiar local colour in New England. Distilled in the New England alembic, French Revolutionary dogmas, German philosophy, Oriental mysticism, assume a semblance that often makes them scarcely recognizable. Though their hold on the public imagination was short-lived, the long-lasting influence that the Transcendentalists had on American literature cannot be denied. Even the philosophy's critics were forced to acknowledge the effects that the Transcendental Movement had on the world, particularly the American experience of the world. For Transcendentalism was a distinctly American expression, with concerns and ideals that perhaps did not fully translate in England or Continental Europe. The philosophy was inexorably bound together with American's expansionist impulse, as well as the troubling question of slavery and women's place in society. A philosophical-literary movement cannot solve such problems, but it can provide the vocabulary to discuss them reasonably.

Core Concept of transcendentalism

At the most basic level, Transcendentalism represented a new way of understanding truth and knowledge. The roots of the philosophy go back to Germany, specifically the writings and theories of Immanuel Kant. In contrast to the scientific revolutions which were daily adding to the store of facts, Kant concerned himself with the abstractions of existence – those things which cannot be known for sure. He argued that individuals have it in their power to reason for themselves whether a thing be true or not, and how to fit their reasoning into an overall view of the world. Kant set himself apart from those who believed the senses to be perfect measures of reality. Kant asserted that humans must embrace the fact that some things cannot be known with certainty, no matter how advanced science and technology become.

Perhaps the central and most controversial thesis of the Critique of Pure Reason is that human beings experience only appearances, not things in themselves; and that space and time are only subjective forms of human intuition that would not subsist in themselves if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of human intuition. Kant calls this thesis transcendental idealism. One of his best summaries of it is arguably the following:

We have therefore wanted to say that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us; and that if we remove our own subject or even only the subjective constitution of the senses in general, then all constitution, all relations of objects in space and time, indeed space and time themselves would disappear, and as appearances they cannot exist in themselves, but only in us. What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us. We are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving them, which is peculiar to us, and which therefore does not necessarily pertain to every being, though to be sure it pertains to every human being. We are concerned solely with this.

Space and time are its pure forms, sensation in general its matter. We can cognize only the former a priori, i.e., prior to all actual perception, and they are therefore called pure intuition; the latter, however, is that in our cognition that is responsible for its being called a posteriori cognition, i.e., empirical intuition. The former adheres to our sensibility absolutely necessarily, whatever sort of sensations we may have; the latter can be very different.

Transcendental idealism

Kant put forth transcendental idealism in the part of the Critique called the Transcendental Aesthetic, which is generally agreed upon by scholars as Kant transcendental idealism, encompasses the following major claims:

- In some sense, human beings experience only appearances, not things in themselves.
- Space and time are not things in themselves, or determinations of things in themselves that would remain if one abstracted from all subjective conditions of human intuition. It is at least a crucial part of what he means by calling space and time transcendently ideal.
- Space and time are nothing other than the subjective forms of human sensible intuition.
- Space and time are empirically real, which means that “everything that can come before us externally as an object” is in both space and time, and that our internal intuitions of ourselves are in time.

Together with the spiritualism of Emanuel Swedenborg, a religious mystic gathering a large following in Western Europe, American intellectuals had the ingredients for a philosophical *mélange* that blended a powerful idealism with Puritanical humility and work ethic.

Relationship Between Romanticism and Transcendentalism

In addition to their heady philosophical forebears, the Transcendentalists owed a great debt to the English Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many distinctly Romantic tropes echo through the pages of Transcendental literature.

In Transcendental philosophy, the grind of ordinary life and society are seen as barriers between the self and the spirit. Thus, Nature presents a way to free the mind of its typical distractions. The very word “transcend” connotes moving beyond some stultifying condition of mind or body. Another strong Romantic concept that the Transcendentalists embraced was the renewed potency and potentiality of the individual. Romanticism, generally speaking, was too much preoccupied with the ego and aesthetics to work for change in the real world. This newly enlightened, transcendent individual could go into the world and work to make it a better place.

Not surprisingly, the conflation of German philosophy and English Romanticism transplanted on American soil produced something quite original. The fact that the United States was still such a young nation, still seeking out her borders, had a powerful impact on the literature being produced. Emerson and his contemporaries saw a nation on the brink of discovering its own voice. Until then, American literature had merely replicated the fashions of Europe. There was precious little originality or innovation.

The Survival of Transcendentalism

Although Transcendentalism in its proper sense did not last much into the 1850s, American literature as a whole saw a revival that may not have been possible without the inspiration of Emerson, Thoreau, and their ilk. The decade or so before the Civil War has in the last century come to be known as the American Renaissance. The literary productions of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman shifted the balance of power in English literature away from the British Isles and towards the United States. The new American literature was bold, fresh, and young. It encompassed the sweep of the prairies and the energies of the explorers. Not everything was glory and progress, however. Social historians look back today and see that other cultures suffered at the hands of American settlers and American industry. For their time, the Transcendentalists were remarkably attuned to the needs and interests of non-white persons, namely Native Americans and African Americans. They spoke in favour of women's rights and abolition, and encouraged protest against the government when its actions disagreed with the common good. In the realm of art, Transcendentalism was the intellectual fuel that stoked the fires of American literature for years to come.

Transcendentalists believed that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—ultimately corrupted the purity of the individual. They had faith that people are at their best when truly "self-reliant" and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

Oriental Impact On Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism has been considerably influenced by Vedic thought as described by Thoreau in *Walden* on the Transcendentalists' direct debt to Vedic thought that is quoted here:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the BhagavatGeeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water- jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

Conclusion

As a conclusion it can be remarked that transcendentalism which rose initially as religions movement in America inspired by the powers of intuition of the leading scholars, influenced to a very large extent to every field of literature. It visualized a new spur, a new approach, a new line of interpretation and a novel way of meditation. Its influence though prevailed at times and diminished at other, could never be obsolete as a whole.

Though having some history of conflict with Unitarianism; the Transcendentalists owed a great debt to the English Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as some distinctly Romantic tropes echo through the pages of Transcendental literature.

In a nutshell it can be uttered that transcendentalism inspired the fundamental human characteristic of grasping through senses.

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