

# TRANSCENDENTALISM:

ESSENTIAL ESSAYS OF  
EMERSON & THOREAU

Including *Self-Reliance* & *Civil Disobedience*



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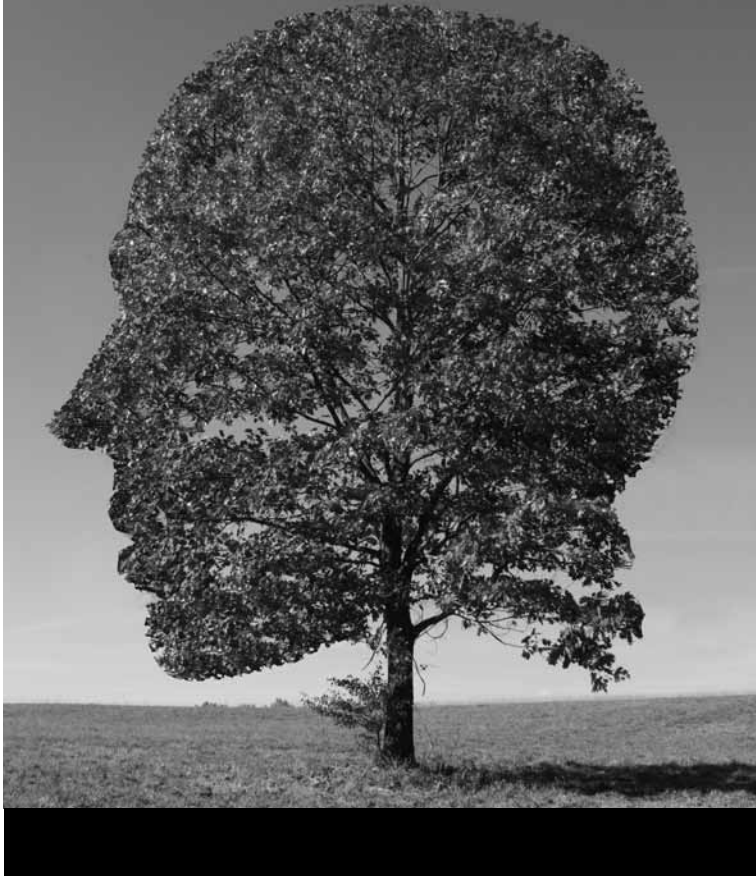


UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

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#### *Self-Reliance*

##### *Friendship*

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# TRANSCENDENTALISM:

## ESSENTIAL ESSAYS OF EMERSON & THOREAU

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# Notes

**What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

# Pointers

## READING POINTERS

### Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

In order to understand the ideas that are expressed in the essays of Emerson and Thoreau, it is important to understand some fundamental concepts of Transcendentalism. When it began in New England in 1836, the Transcendentalist Movement helped create new ideas, literature, religion, culture, and philosophy. The Transcendentalists expressed ideas that were rebellious—the writers were protesting society’s belief in intellectualism, the authority of classic works, and the supremacy of religious doctrine. While most members of nineteenth-century society were striving to conform to its culture, traditions, and laws, Transcendentalists believed that each person should rely on his or her own intuition and spiritual essence; in fact, this trust in the self was the only way to reach an ideal spiritual state.

As you read the essays in this book, notice how the authors deal with each of the following:

- **Nature**—To the Transcendentalist, Nature is the outward sign of inward spirit, expressing the “radical correspondence of visible things and human thoughts,” as Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836).
- **Religion and Spirituality**—Nature and spirituality are closely linked in Transcendentalism. Notice how the authors allude to elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Unitarianism in their writings. It should be noted that these religions focus more on spirituality than on doctrine and dogma.
- **Government**—Transcendentalists rebelled against popular notions of government and institutions because these entities sought to control the minds and lives of individuals. Thoreau, throughout his life, was against slavery (he was a strong supporter of the Underground Railroad); he also accepted imprisonment rather than paying a tax that supported the Mexican War, which he felt was unjust.
- **Education**—It is interesting to note that both Thoreau and Emerson attended Harvard, but later rebelled against its institutions and practices. Many Transcendentalist ideas and philosophies were aimed at changing the opinions of the intellectuals of that time.

## R A L P H W A L D O E M E R S O N

**R**ALPH WALDO EMERSON, the founder of the Transcendentalist Movement, was a philosopher, activist, and author, as well as a guide and patron of other writers, especially his friend Henry David Thoreau. Emerson's Transcendentalism embraced some principles of Christianity, Eastern religions, and the English Romantics, but was not a subcategory of any of them; instead, it was a new, truly American philosophy, with the idea of self-reliance at its core.

Emerson was born in Boston. His father and grandfather were both Unitarian ministers, and the call to preach is clearly evident in Emerson's writing. However, he advocated a break with some of the formal teachings of the Unitarian Church. For instance, he caused an uproar while giving the graduation address at Harvard Divinity School when he disavowed the divinity of Jesus. Although Jesus was a good, insightful man who saw the truth clearly, said Emerson, Jesus was not God, and focusing on Jesus' divinity had done harm to the Church. Instead of blindly worshipping, each person should attempt to perceive the truth as clearly as Jesus had.

Emerson helped edit the magazine, *The Dial*, which published many Transcendentalist writings in the 1880s, and his first book of essays, *Nature*, (1836) was one of the most important publications of the Transcendentalists. In it, Emerson espouses the belief that human beings are connected to everything in the natural world by a common soul and states that all human beings have access to this soul through their own intuition; there is no need, he says, to get truth from books or higher authorities. He would elaborate upon this idea in *Self-Reliance*, his book of essays.

Although he claimed that travel is seldom worthwhile (because any knowledge can be gained at home), Emerson did travel to several continents, and he crossed America as a lecturer. While in England, he met several important poets of the Romantic Movement, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their writing, like Emerson's, stressed the importance of individual intuition and the importance of finding solace in the natural world.

Emerson was married twice; his first wife, however, died of tuberculosis at the age of nineteen. With his second wife, Lydia (he called her Lidian), he had five children. The oldest, Waldo, died of scarlet fever at the age of five, and both parents suffered great emotional stress because of it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson died from pneumonia on April 27, 1882. The bells in Concord rang 79 times—one for each year of his life.



## S E L F - R E L I A N C E

Ne te quaesiveris extra.<sup>†</sup>

Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
Nothing to him falls early or too late.  
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

*Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune.*<sup>†</sup>

Cast the bantling on the rocks,  
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat,  
Wintered with the hawk and fox.  
Power and speed be hands and feet.

I READ THE OTHER day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. Always the soul hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.<sup>†</sup> Familiar as the

<sup>†</sup>Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.



voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses,<sup>†</sup> Plato,<sup>†</sup> and Milton<sup>†</sup> is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. It is not without preestablished harmony, this sculpture in the memory. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. Bravely let him speak the utmost syllable of his confession. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. It needs a divine man to exhibit anything divine. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay under the Almighty effort let us advance on Chaos and the Dark.

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even brutes. That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not. Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces, we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it; so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it. So God has armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious and its claims not to be put by, it will stand by itself. Do not think the youth has no force, because he cannot speak to you and me. Hark! in the next room who spoke so clear and emphatic? It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries. Good Heaven! it is he! it is that very lump of bashfulness and phlegm which for weeks has done nothing but eat when you were by, and now rolls out these words like bellstrokes. It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries. Good Heaven! It is he! It is that very lump of bashfulness and phlegm which for weeks has done nothing but eat when you were by, and now rolls out these words like bellstrokes. It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries. Bashful or bold then, he will know how to make us seniors very unnecessary.

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. How is a boy the master of society; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He cumber himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him; he does not court you. But the man is as it were clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no *Lethe*<sup>†</sup> for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutral, godlike independence! Who can thus lose all pledge and, having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence, must always be formidable, must always engage the poet's and the man's regards. Of such an immortal youth the force would be felt. He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private but necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men and put them in fear.

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company,<sup>†</sup> in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The

*Walden:  
Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*

**Glossary**

- “I am monarch...to dispute.”** – from eighteenth-century poet William Cowper’s “Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk” (1782); this poem has a few other names, including “The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk.”
- Atlas** – a figure from classical mythology who holds the world on his shoulders
- Old Cato** – Marcus Porcius Cato (243-149 B.C.), now known as Cato the Elder, was a Roman statesman known for his simple living and high moral standards.
- “De Re Rustica”** – (also called “De Agri Cultura”) Roman author Lucius Iunius Moderatus Columell’s (4-ca.70 A.D.) manual on farming
- Cultivator** – a farm journal
- Olympus** – According to classical mythology, the home of the gods was on Mount Olympus.
- Harivansa** – an important piece of classical Indian literature dealing with the life of the god Krishna (see later Note, *Damodara*)
- Concord Battle Ground** – one site of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, the first military engagement in the Revolutionary War
- “steppes of Tartary”** – a reference to a series of treeless, semi-arid plateaus in Central Asia
- Damodara** – one of the many names of Krishna, the major Hindu god; often depicted as a young cowherd playing a flute, Damodara is known as a heroic warrior and teacher, and is a central figure in the *Harivansa* (see earlier Note, *Harivansa*).
- Cassiopeia’s Chair** – a constellation in the sky comprised of five stars that make a rough M or W; the ancient Greeks believed it represented a queen in her throne who boasted about her beauty.
- Pleiades** – a star cluster located in the constellation Taurus; it is also called the Seven Sisters. The constellation is important to many cultures, and it is referred to in many religious and ancient texts.
- Hyades** – a cluster of stars in the constellation Taurus; the brightest stars form a V. It is the nearest star cluster to Earth.
- Aldebaran** – one of the brightest stars in the sky; it is in the constellation Taurus.
- Altair** – another very bright star

## Vocabulary

Note that this alphabetical vocabulary list covers all the essays.

- abide** – to remain or remain strong  
**abject** – lowly; wretched  
**aboriginal** – original; primal  
**absolve** – to clear from blame or obligation  
**admonition** – a scolding or warning  
**affinity** – a liking  
**alacrity** – eagerness; promptness  
**alburnum** – a white, soft layer under wood's visible surface  
**alluvion** – the flow of water  
**ambrosial** – heavenly (According to classical mythology, ambrosia is the food of the gods.)  
**amelioration** – improvement  
**amity** – friendship; peaceful relations  
**antagonism** – hostility  
**apathies** – lapses of caring or concern  
**apprehend** – to understand; to expect  
**apprehension** – the ability to be understood  
**arduous** – difficult; laborious  
**ascetic** – self-denying; shunning food and drink  
**asinine** – ridiculous  
**askance** – sideways, implying disapproval or distrust  
**assuaged** – soothed  
**atheism** – the denial of the existence of God  
**audacious** – bold  
**auroral** – morning-like  
**austere** – somber and grave; strict in discipline  
**aversion** – an avoidance  
**backgammon** – a two-person board game that is played with dice  
**bantling** – [*archaic*] a baby  
**bard** – a poet  
**bayou** – a slow-moving body of water  
**begirt** – [*archaic*] encircled  
**behooves** – becomes; suits  
**benevolence** – goodwill  
**bereave** – to rob  
**bestowed** – given  
**bivouac** – [*archaic*] an all-night military vigil or guard  
**bough** – a branch