

## COMMENTARY

“The Over-Soul” (1841)

Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1803-1882)

“The Over-Soul is ‘that great nature in which we rest...that Unity within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.’ This Platonic concept, first stated in Emerson’s early lectures and in such works as *Nature* and the ‘Divinity School Address,’ is here developed as a basic principle in the thought of Transcendentalism.

‘We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole.’ Perceptible only through intuition and not to be communicated through words, this divine spirit is the source of all moral and intellectual growth, for ‘the heart, which abandons itself to the Supreme Mind, finds itself related to all its works and will travel a royal road to particular knowledge and powers.’ The revelations of truth received by various original thinkers and teachers proceed from ‘an influx of the Divine mind’ into their minds. ‘The nature of these revelations is always the same: they are perceptions of the absolute law.’ What we call genius is simply the true insight derived from an influx of this ‘same Omniscience...into the intellect.’ This universal and benign omnipresence is neither ‘our god of tradition’ nor ‘our god of rhetoric,’ but a God known to men only in moments of mystic enthusiasm, whose visitation leaves them altered, self-reliant, and purified of petty aims. The man who has received intimations of the ‘Highest Law’ in this fashion ‘will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity.’”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“As ‘Self-Reliance’ broadens the social concepts which Emerson first suggested in ‘The American Scholar,’ so ‘The Over-Soul’ intensifies the spiritual idealism of the earlier essay *Nature*. In this sense it is Emerson’s most ‘transcendental’ pronouncement. It has also been his most controversial, ever since its first appearance in *Essays* (1841). Yet many readers who cannot accept its extreme idealism or its theological implications have found delight in the art of its expression.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long  
*The American Tradition in Literature*, 3rd edition  
(Norton 1956-67) 1150

“The central thought of a primal mind, a cosmic unity in its Platonic sense, is one found everywhere in Emerson’s writings. Here he defines it again: ‘It is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the Eternal One.’”

Max J. Herzberg & staff

*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“The Transcendentalists were independents and Antinomians; they recognized no laws that were not their laws or, for that matter, any worlds that were not ‘built’ for and by individual spirits as expressions of their sovereignty over external forces. Though they recognized God as an ‘over-soul,’ they made it clear that He is not over-lord and that His Spirit is continuous with and expressive of the discipline that free wills exhibit of themselves. Or, to put the doctrine more technically, God is transcendent over Nature precisely because he is immanent in man’s spirit.”

Herbert W. Schneider  
*A History of American Philosophy*

“Emerson called his introductory lecture ‘Doctrine of the Soul,’ and it was the embryo of the great essay on ‘The Over-Soul,’ which would become the keystone of his philosophy. The word *soul* had connotations for him and his audience which it does not have for twentieth-century readers. But to understand his basic message in these lectures it is not necessary to analyze all his metaphysical and metapsychological assumptions. In fact, his frequent ambiguity suggests that the term had no precise meaning for him. But his main intention was not ambiguous: he wanted to convince his audience that man has almost unlimited possibilities for a better life than history records, though a few individuals, such as Homer, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, have given glimpses of human achievement on a very high scale.... Science was revealing a physical world as remarkable as the supernatural one of the Old Testament. For Emerson the greatest miracle of all remained: the Godhead or Over-Soul...dwells in every man....

Plotinus taught that from the One all things flow, or emanate. The first emanation from the One is Mind (*nous*) or Universal Intelligence, which provides a rational foundation for the world. A World Soul emanates from the One, and from the World Soul, the human soul. Below the World Soul lies the realm of Nature, existing in time but reflecting the eternal ideas of the One. Both the World Soul and the human soul are eternal, but habitation in a physical body is a ‘fall.’ The soul gives the body vitality, sensitivity, and the power of being rational. It survives the death of the body and either transmigrates to other bodies or rejoins the World Soul. Matter is the final and lowest emanation....

Emerson’s key Neoplatonic essay is ‘The Over-Soul,’ and it is supplemented by ‘Intellect,’ ‘Spiritual Laws,’ and ‘Circles.’ The exuberance of ‘The Over-Soul’ was mentioned above as a stylistic characteristic. But why was the author so excited? Because he was writing about the ecstasy which Plotinus attributed to union with the One. Had Emerson actually experienced such a state of mind and emotions, or had he only imagined it to illustrate his theory of the ‘Soul’? This is a question difficult to answer precisely, because the only evidence is the essay itself. Oliver Wendell Holmes says in his biography of Emerson: ‘The Over-Soul’ might almost be called the *Over-flow* of a spiritual imagination. We cannot help thinking of the ‘pious, virtuous, God-intoxicated Spinoza’....The circle is a metaphor for the expanding life of man radiating from the soul at the center.”

Gay Wilson Allen  
*Waldo Emerson*  
(Penguin 1982) 328, 346, 375, 376, 378

Michael Hollister (2015)