

11 CRITICS DISCUSS

NEW ENGLAND TRANSCENDENTALISM

“This term [Transcendental] is applied to many things....One who has read only Locke, says it means all ideas are not innate....That belief we term Transcendentalism which maintains that man has ideas, that come not through the five senses, or the powers of reasoning; but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world....This, then, is the doctrine of Transcendentalism--the substantive, independent existence of the soul of man, the reality of conscience, the religious sense, the inner light, of man’s religious affections, his knowledge of right and truth, his sense of duty...his love for beauty and holiness, his religious aspirations--with this it starts as something not dependent on education, custom, command, or anything beyond man himself....

The existence of men’s bodies and their senses, and the soul and its senses must both be referred to one source--God....The old deriving all ideas from sensation, leads to Atheism, to a religion which is but self-interest--an ethical code which makes right synonymous with indulgence of appetite...The moral law, God’s voice in every heart, independent [of] interest, expediency or appetite...enables us to resist these; a universal, eternal, standard of truth, beauty, goodness, holiness, to which every man can turn and follow, if he will...

Transcendentalism is predicated on the reality of the spiritual or religious element in man; his inborn capacity to perceive truth and right, so that moral and religious truths can be proved to him with the same degree of certainty that attends mathematical demonstration....Religion is to cease to be an outward form, the observance of the sabbath, attendance on church, support of the clergy, the admission of the Bible and the Savior, the assent of the will. It is to be a personal matter of each man.”

Charles Mayo Ellis
“An Essay on Transcendentalism” (1842)

“The summer of 1839 saw the full dawn of the Transcendental movement in New England. The rise of this enthusiasm was as mysterious as that of any form of revival; and only they who were of the faith could comprehend how bright was this morning-time of a new hope. Transcendentalism was an assertion of the inalienable integrity of man, of the immanence of Divinity in instinct. In part, it was a reaction against Puritan Orthodoxy; in part, an effect of renewed study of the ancients, or Oriental Pantheists, of Plato and the Alexandrians, or Plutarch’s *Morals*, Seneca and Epictetus; in part, the natural product of the culture of the place and time.

On the somewhat stunted stock of Unitarianism--whose characteristic dogma was trust in individual reason as correlative to Supreme Wisdom--had been grafted German Idealism, as taught by masters of the most various schools--by Kant and Jacobi, Fichte and Novalis, Schelling and Hegel, Schleiermacher and DeWette, by Madame de Stael, Cousin, Coleridge, and Carlyle; and the result was a vague yet exalting conception of the godlike nature of the human spirit....Amidst materialists, zealots, and skeptics, the Transcendentalist believed in perpetual inspiration, the miraculous power of will, and a birthright to universal good....His maxims were ‘Trust, dare and be; infinite good is ready for your asking; seek and find’....Thus, by mere attraction of affinity, grew together the brotherhood of the ‘Like-minded’...The only password of membership to this association...was a hopeful and liberal spirit.”

William Ellery Channing
“A Participant’s Definition” (1852)

“As Emerson’s stimulating powers became more generally recognized, he gradually became the center of a group of thinkers known as the ‘Transcendentalists.’ The so-called ‘Transcendental movement’ which those followers of the new light inaugurated may be regarded as an outgrowth and extension of New England Unitarianism. It was largely indebted to the ideal philosophy of the recent German thinkers, and on its humanitarian side it adopted and endeavored to put into practice certain wild notions of social reform. Severely practical as it may seem, the high strung New England nature has a strong tinge of the visionary, and the Transcendentalists included some long-haired prophets who confused and mystified

themselves and their hearers with high-sounding and 'Orphic utterances.' In spite of frequent assertions to the contrary, Emerson himself does not always escape the prevailing tendency to disguise a comparatively familiar thought in mystical and oracular phrases. Charles Dickens declared that he was given to understand when in Boston 'that whatever was unintelligible would certainly be transcendental'....

Two direct results of this 'Transcendental movement' were the establishment of *The Dial* (1840), a magazine for the promulgation of the new doctrines, and the founding of Brook Farm, an agricultural and industrial community intended to exemplify the ideal state of society. Immense hopes and unselfish efforts were centered in *The Dial*. Emerson was a frequent contributor, and for a time its editor, some of his best-known prose and verse appearing first in its pages. It gathered the leading Transcendentalists about it: George Ripley, a scholarly Unitarian minister, afterwards the head of Brook Farm; Margaret Fuller, its first editor, and a woman of wide acquirements, who was called the 'priestess of Transcendentalism'; A. Bronson Alcott, mystic and vegetarian, who chopped wood and contributed 'Orphic sayings,' which were at least sufficiently unintelligible for the most Transcendental taste."

Henry S. Pancoast
An Introduction to American Literature
(1898; Holt 1902) 171-72

"A reliance on the intuition and the conscience, a form of idealism; a philosophical Romanticism reaching America a generation or two after it developed in Europe. Transcendentalism, though based on doctrines of European philosophers (particularly Kant) and sponsored in America chiefly by Emerson after he had absorbed it from Carlyle, Coleridge, Goethe, and others, took on special significance in the United States, where it so dominated the New England authors as to become a literary as well as a philosophic movement. The movement gained its impetus in America in part from meetings of a small group that came together to discuss 'new thought.' The group seemed to agree that within the nature of human beings there was something that transcended human experience--an intuitive and personal revelation. The movement informally sponsored two important activities: the publication of *The Dial* (1840-44) and Brook Farm.

Transcendentalists believed in living close to nature and taught the dignity of manual labor. They strongly felt the need of intellectual companionships and emphasized spiritual living. Every person's relation to God was to be established directly by the individual rather than through a ritualistic church. They held that human beings were divine in their own right, an opinion opposed to the doctrines held by the Puritan Calvinists in New England. Self-trust and self-reliance were to be practiced at all times, because to trust self was really to trust the voice of God speaking intuitively within us.

The Transcendentalists believed in democracy and individualism. Some extremists went so far as to evolve a system of dietetics and to rule out coffee, wine, and tobacco. Most of the Transcendentalists were by nature reformers, though Emerson--the most vocal interpreter of the group--refused to go so far in this direction as, for instance, Bronson Alcott. Most of the reforms were attempts to regenerate the human spirit rather than to prescribe particular movements. The Transcendentalists were among the early advocates of the enfranchisement of women....Ultimately...*Transcendentalism* was an epistemology--a way of knowing--and what tied together the frequently contradictory attitudes of the loosely defined group was the belief that human beings can intuitively transcend the limits of the senses and of logic and directly receive higher truths denied to more mundane methods of knowing."

C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon
A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition
(Macmillan 1936-92)

"The Romantic theory assumes that literature is mainly or even purely an emotional experience, that man is naturally good, that man's impulses are trustworthy, that the rational faculty is unreliable to the point of being dangerous or possibly evil. The Romantic theory of human nature teaches that if man will rely upon his impulses, he will achieve the good life. When this notion is combined, as it frequently is, with a pantheistic philosophy or religion, it commonly teaches that through surrender to impulse man will not only achieve the good life but will achieve also a kind of mystical union with the Divinity: this, for example, is the doctrine of Emerson. Literature thus becomes a form of what is known popularly as self-expression. It

is not the business of man to understand and improve himself, for such an effort is superfluous: he is good as he is, if he will only let himself alone, or, as we might say, let himself go.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937,1947) 8

“A philosophical and literary movement that flourished in New England, particularly at Concord (c. 1836-60), as a reaction against 18th-century rationalism, the skeptical philosophy of Locke, and the confining religious orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. This Romantic, idealistic, mystical, and individualistic belief was more a cast of thought than a systematic philosophy. It was eclectic in nature and had many sources. Its qualities may be discerned in Jonathan Edwards’s belief in ‘a Divine and Supernatural Light, immediately imparted to the soul by the spirit of God,’ and the idealism of Channing, whose Unitarianism was a religious predecessor of this belief in an indwelling God...

The name, as well as many of the ideas, was derived from Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in which he declares: ‘I call all knowledge *transcendental* which is concerned, not with objects, but with our mode of knowing objects so far as this is possible *a priori*.’ From other German philosophers, such as Jacobi, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Schelling, and Herder, it received impulses toward mysticism and toward practical action as an expression of the will. Through Goethe, Richter, Novalis, and other literary figures, the philosophy was more easily communicated to American authors, and, at second remove, the doctrines of German Transcendentalism were reflected in the poetry and criticism of such English authors as Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth. In addition, the New England Transcendentalist belief was shaped by the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, and such English neo-Platonists as Cudworth and More, as well as by certain aspects of the teachings of Confucius, the Mohammedan Sufis, the writers of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Buddhists, the eclectic idealist Victor Cousin, the Hebrew and Greek scriptural authors, Thomas a Kempis, Pascal, and Swedenborg.

Although the very spirit of Transcendentalism permitted contradiction, and its eclectic sources made for diverse concepts, in its larger outlines the belief had as its fundamental base a monism holding to the unity of the world and God and the immanence of God in the world. Because of this indwelling of divinity, everything in the world is a microcosm containing within itself all the laws and meaning of existence. Likewise, the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and latently contains all that the world contains [holographic]. Man may fulfill his divine potentialities either through a rapt mystical state, in which the divine is infused into the human, or through coming into contact with the truth, beauty, and goodness embodied in Nature and originating in the Over-Soul. Thus occurs the doctrine of correspondence between the tangible world and the human mind, and the identity of moral and physical laws. Through belief in the divine authority of the soul’s intuitions and impulses, based on this identification of the individual soul with God, there developed the doctrine of self-reliance and individualism, the disregard of external authority, tradition, and logical demonstration, and the absolute optimism of the movement.

These primary beliefs varied greatly as they were interpreted in the writings of different authors, although the most important literary expressions of Transcendental thought is considered to lie in Thoreau’s *Walden* and in such works of Emerson as *Nature*, ‘The American Scholar,’ the ‘Divinity School Address,’ ‘The Over-Soul,’ ‘Self-Reliance,’ and ‘Compensation.’ Other members of the informal Transcendental Club whose prose and poetry express similar ideas, included Alcott, Margaret Fuller, the younger W. E. Channing, Ripley, Jones Very, C. P. Cranch, J. F. Clarke, Theodore Parker, Brownson, Elizabeth Peabody, and W. H. Channing...So far as the movement had a central voice, *The Dial* (1840-44) may be considered its organ, and, although it necessarily remained on an idealistic plane, it was instrumental in the formation of such social experiments as Brook Farm and Fruitlands.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

“Transcendentalism emerged as a full-fledged movement of New England thought between 1815 and 1836. The first date marks the maturing of the liberalizing ministry of William Ellery Channing; the second, the publication of Emerson’s *Nature*, the original--and probably the best--systematic expression of

the Transcendentalist philosophy. Thereafter the movement continued to expand, first as a revolt against the sterile Unitarian orthodoxy, then as a protest against the continuing cultural dependence of America on Europe, and finally as a profound exploration of the spiritual foundations and moral implications of the new democracy. From the beginning it attracted eccentrics no less than men of genius, and after the Civil War it gave way to weaker forms of idealism. But at its zenith in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott--and by its challenge to fresh speculation in Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman--its vitalizing effect upon American art and literature and, indeed, upon the development of American democracy as a whole, remains unrivaled.

The source of this vitality lies in the intellectual background of Transcendentalism: in its appropriation of certain insights of Puritan, Quaker, and other colonial theologies as they had been refracted through the secular and equalitarian ideology of the Revolution; and in its reexpression of these insights in the vocabulary of contemporary European philosophy. For in spite of its oft proclaimed rejection of authority and its frankly nationalistic bias Transcendentalism was rooted both in the American past and in the Europe of that day.

To Puritanism in the broadest sense, for example, it owed among other things its pervasive moralism. Like all those early pioneers, who sought freedom of conscience in a new land, the Transcendentalists were ever disposed to interpret life ethically, to subordinate the aesthetic, intellectual, and even political and economic aspects of human nature to man's significance as a moral agent. Once again, after two centuries and more, this conception was used as a means of dignifying all phases of human activity, even the most humble....A similar affinity may be discovered between transcendental 'intuition' and the doctrine of the 'inner light.' For each of these theories interpreted material nature mystically as a 'veil' or symbol of the divine; and each maintained that every individual can penetrate the veil to discover divine truth for himself without the aid of traditional authority or even of logic...

Equally radical was the transformation of the doctrine of the inner light brought about by the acknowledgment of the autonomous power of secular reason, in part aided by the accelerating conquests of natural science. For this acknowledgment--validated anew by the role of reason in formulating the principles of the Revolution, and manifested concretely both in the rationalism of Unitarian theology and in the pragmatism of frontier thought--had undermined belief in the inner light at two points.

In the first place, it challenged the theoretical competence of the inner light. Although authoritarian in spirit itself, the new emphasis on reason was wholly antiauthoritarian in implication. Holding with Locke that all knowledge is perceptual in origin, it demanded that every truth be held subject to the test of experiment and observation. And this was a test which, with its implicit mysticism, the doctrine of the inner light as the world of God could not hope to sustain. In the second place, the new emphasis on reason challenged the doctrine of the inner light on the score of its immediate utility. For while the older doctrine could promise only the quietistic value of bringing man face to face with God, the reason, practically applied, promised a control of nature itself and thereby the immediate satisfaction of human needs....

It is doubtful whether these transformations of the Puritan ethic and theory of knowledge ever could have achieved the degree of articulate formulation they subsequently did without the stimulus of contemporary European philosophy. There had emerged in Germany an intellectually sophisticated movement elaborately embodied in the systems of Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, and--at a further remove--in the thought of Coleridge, Carlyle, and Victor Cousin. This movement, idealistic in nature, had its specialized formulas and idioms, its accepted premises and methods. In literature it took the form of Romanticism....

The distinction found in Coleridge and Emerson alike, between the reason and the understanding--which, by a curious distortion of terminology, identified the reason with intuition and imagination, and the understanding with logic and induction--could express and justify the Transcendental's desire to retain both the mysticism of the past and the empiricism of the present...Finally, the idealistic view of the universe as an embodiment of a single, cosmic psyche, now manifesting itself as man, now as Nature, and achieving through the interaction of the two in history its own secret intent, permitted the self-asserting impulse of the individual--his determination to be himself at all costs--to be explained as the consciousness of his identity

with the world-psyche, while his self-transcending or outgoing impulses could be attributed to the consciousness of his own finitude, to the fact of his awareness that he is only one fragmentary expression of the world-psyche among others. The theory could also account for and validate the distinction between the intuitive and the inductive, interpreting the first of these faculties as the necessary condition for conscious union with the world-psyche, and the second as the necessary condition for survival as a separate expression of that psyche.

Historians have demonstrated the catalytic effect of Plato and Plotinus on Emerson and of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other Oriental tales and poems on Emerson and Thoreau. But more often than not such influences out of the past were shared by American writers with their European contemporaries, and the precise channels or directions of their flow can be distinguished only with the greatest difficulty. The minds of Emerson, Whitman, and Melville were characteristically American in their willingness to appropriate usable ideas wherever they might be found...

The town of Concord was a larger home and the circle of friends that gathered in the Emerson drawing room was but an extended family....The Thoreaus, Hoars, and Ripleys were native citizens, but Alcott, Ellery Channing, and Hawthorne were later comers; Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, the mystic Jones Very, and many others of the Transcendental set were never more than visitors. The Social Circle which met frequently at the Emerson home on Tuesday evenings consisted of 'twenty-five of our citizens; doctor, lawyer, farmer, trader, miller, mechanic; solidest men, who yield the solidest gossip.'

A very different group had formed the habit of gathering at one another's houses for an afternoon of serious conversation, whether in Boston or Concord, and so the 'Transcendental Club' came into being without deliberate intention or constitution. It was, as one facetious member remarked, 'like going to heaven in a swing,' and Emerson himself at times mocked their earnest aspirations. 'Perhaps they only agreed in having fallen upon Coleridge and Wordsworth and Goethe, then on Carlyle, with pleasure and sympathy. Otherwise, their education and reading were not marked, but had the American superficialness, and their studies were solitary,' like his own. Bronson Alcott, the Orphic philosopher, existed in an ethereal sphere which he shared with Plato; Thoreau came fresh from the woods and fields; Emerson from his study; Parker, 'our Savonarola,' and Brownson from their churches, the one a Unitarian, the other inclining toward Rome. Margaret Fuller and occasionally Hawthorne's sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody shot bolts of aggressive femininity into the company with their radical notion that women are people, seeking friendship on a plane transcending sex.

One such friendship, violent on Margaret's part, acquiescent but at times disturbing on Emerson's, produced 'the modest quarterly journal called *The Dial*,' organ of the movement for four years. George Ripley, inspired by Owen and Fourier, attempted the most famous of all communistic experiments at Brook Farm, even though the stars of the movement took only a casual part, preferring to shine each in his own sphere. A third practical--if we may stretch the word--result was the Concord School of Philosophy, founded in 1879 by Alcott in his own back yard, a highly successful pioneer of the American summer session. For at least a quarter of a century, the idyllic town was the intellectual seed pod of the nation."

Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 346-51, 356, 374-75

"The 'Transcendentalists' were a number of young Americans, most of them born into the Unitarianism of New England in the early nineteenth century, who in the 1830's became excited, or rather intoxicated, by the new literature of England and of the Continent (and also by a cursory introduction to that of the Orient), and who thereupon revolted against the rationalism of their fathers. Perhaps 'revolted' is a bit too strong: though they said scornful things, in Emerson's phrase, about 'the corpse-cold Unitarianism of Harvard College and Brattle Street,' they owed much to the liberalism of the creed they outgrew. More accurately, then, they may be defined in a somewhat wider perspective as children of the Puritan past who, having been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England's original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from Romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany....

Enlarging our perspective still further, we may also see in the Transcendentalists not so much a collection of exotic ideologues as the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization. Protestant to the core, they turn their protest against what is customarily called the 'Protestant ethic': They refuse to labor in a proper calling, conscientiously cultivate the arts of leisure, and strive to avoid making money....Provincial they no doubt were, and often ludicrous in their high seriousness; even so, they are what we have to display as an American counterpart to the ebullient Romanticism of Europe."

Perry Miller, ed.
The American Transcendentalists
(Doubleday/Anchor 1957) ix, x

"In America, a movement of philosophical idealism which reached its height in New England during the 1840s and inspired the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and others. Rebelling against the 'coldness' of 18th-century empiricism and its reliance on sense experience, the Transcendentalists asserted the supremacy of mind over matter and defended intuition as a guide to truth. The terms *transcendent* and *transcendental* had been employed during the Middle Ages to designate concepts which 'overpass' the finite. The Schoolmen had used them to describe universal truths which transcended the categories of Aristotle. Kant, who influenced the New England group, reserved the term *transcendent* for those ideas that can in no way be experienced, using *transcendental* for *a priori* elements of thought (such as the concepts of space and time) which do not arise from sense experience but are manifested in and give meaning to sense experience.

New England Transcendentalism was one of several aspects of the new Romanticism which stemmed from Germany and France, and its followers read widely in Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Goethe, and Mme. de Stael, though many received their inspiration indirectly by way of Coleridge and Carlyle. Indeed, the Transcendentalists often adopted the language of Coleridge in distinguishing between the old school of the 'reason,' which reached conclusions by observation and induction, and the new school of 'understanding,' which used perception of truth regardless of external evidence. They caught the contagion of Carlyle's moral fervor, sometimes echoing his jagged eloquence as well as his thoughts. When Thoreau writes, 'We know but few men, a great many coats and breeches,' one suspects he has been reading Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

However, both Thoreau and Emerson were genuinely inventive and original; their chief debt to the European idealists was an attitude of antiformalism and a philosophical sanction for their own independence of thought. Emerson's *Nature* (1836) is...'the original--and probably the best--systematic expression of the Transcendentalist philosophy.' The beginning of Emerson's lecture called 'The Transcendentalist' (1842) is the most articulate contemporary statement of the group's position:

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, "The senses give us representations of things," but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us

assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken.

New England Transcendentalism was not an organized movement, nor did it produce a philosophical system; like its chief spokesman, Emerson, it stood for self-expression and so encouraged its followers to seek the light whenever their natures pointed it out. Three specific projects were closely related to the movement, however: the Transcendental Club, *The Dial*, and Brook Farm....

The Dial and Brook Farm both had their roots in the discussion of the Transcendental Club [organized in 1836 at the home of the Rev. George Ripley for 'exchange of thought among those interested in the new views in philosophy, theology, and literature']...On the whole...the Transcendentalists were slow to take group action; they regarded each man as a law unto himself and often looked on causes and charities with skepticism. They were somewhat slow to espouse active abolitionism, though their belief in freedom and individualism, together with their impatience with conventional ideas about property rights, made them sympathetic from the start. In the end many of them took action against the slave interests in one form or another, and both Emerson and Thoreau supported John Brown."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"Its classical description, formulated in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917) by H. C. Goddard, begins with the central conceptions of the oversoul and of the validity of intuition arising from man's participation in divinity—'that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other.' From these conceptions certain ethical conclusions may be drawn, principally the doctrine of self-reliance, a spirit of optimism, and defiance of tradition and authority; for to the extent that all men are godlike in their being and knowing, they must trust themselves, can overcome evil, and should regard their fellow men as equal."

William M. Gibson & George Arms
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 1-2

"Emerson was drawn to Idealism for a number of reasons: he had grown up with the Christian doctrine that the sensual appetites are either sinful or a temptation to sin. Even the Christian confidence in the efficacy of prayer was based on the conviction that the human mind could communicate with God and receive answers--divine wisdom. Then the Neoplatonists had taught him that all *being* emanates from *spirit*. Thus he is now a confirmed 'idealist [who] takes his departure from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them,' so that to him all things have 'a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Center of him.' In other words, the world takes the shape of the mind perceiving it. Thus, says Emerson, the Transcendentalist 'believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy.'

The term *Transcendental* was borrowed from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, but Emerson's debt to Kant was slight and indirect (through Coleridge and Carlyle, who had reinterpreted Kant in their own way). An anonymous English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1838; Emerson bought a copy and examined it enough to mark a few passages....But Emerson did not understand Kant. By saying that ideas of the self, the cosmos, and God transcended experience, Kant did not mean that they could be produced by intuition, but by pure reason only. The human mind can never have direct knowledge of them, though to satisfy the need for belief it is necessary to presume their existence and act as if they were real. Kant declared that 'there is a great difference between something given to my reason as an *object absolutely*, or merely as an *object in the idea*.' Emerson made no such distinction....

One of the secrets of Emerson's literary appeal: his choosing metaphors of everyday experience to convey his subtle abstractions. And they are indeed subtle abstractions, what has often been called Emerson's 'Transcendentalism.' 'The path of things is silent,' he says, meaning, in the Kantian sense, that what things are in themselves can never be known, only their external appearances. The poet resigns

'himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms.' It is not, therefore, with his intellect, or conscious effort, that the poet learns these secrets, but by *abandoning* himself 'to the nature of things.' Like the enraptured worshiper of God, the poet unlocks 'his human doors' and permits 'the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.' The 'transparent eye-ball' experience in *Nature* is usually labeled *mystical*, but in 'The Poet' *unconscious* seems a better term for the source of the vision or fantasy which the poet attempts to translate into words....

Some of these 'radicals' [Transcendentalists] have found society falling so far short of their ideals that they have tried to withdraw—'dropouts' of the 1840s; the number of parallels with similar disaffected youth of the 1960s is astonishing."

Gay Wilson Allen
Waldo Emerson
(Penguin 1981) 391-92, 434

Michael Hollister (2015)