

American Romanticism: Kantian Roots in Emerson's Transcendental Thinking

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to make systems of thought come alive from within and let the reader know how in the nineteenth century the world looked to certain minds in ways that were of historical significance to the debates and conceptions of the future. The paper explores the birth and impact of American transcendental thinking in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson to better understand America's intellectual past.

Keywords: Emerson, Transcendentalism, Kant, understanding, reason.

Introduction to the History of Ideas

A review of the history of human thought demonstrates that the way we understand the world has changed over time. Some of the most revolutionary changes in our daily lives and greatest times of change have occurred because we adjusted how we think about the world around us, no longer seeing our world as our ancestors did. These changes alter our relationship with our world, our social relationships, and our understanding of right and wrong.

Intellectual history is the study of human cognitive behavior over time. It teaches us that our thoughts have a history and that our ways of thinking are the product of that history. Thus, we see our own thoughts in relation to the origins of those ways of thinking. Thus, the goal in this study is to examine the birth and impact of American transcendental thinking, and in following the intellectual history approach, the aim is to understand our intellectual past. Here, the task is not to gauge whether a particular way of thinking is right or wrong, deep or shallow, and wise or foolish. It is also not about questioning the truth value of prior ways of thinking. Instead, the approach used explores transcendentalism in America as one of the ways of thinking of the past to understand it in its own historical terms.

Kantian Legacy

Kant was influenced by the basis of eighteenth-century optimistic natural philosophy. It holds that humans possess natural faculties (i.e., senses and natural reason) that link us to natural truths through the medium of nature. That is, we are able to see through nature to nature's author (i.e., the creator, God) and to that author's design. The philosophy also assumes that nature and human beings interact to the benefit of humanity. individual. (Kors and Korshin, eds., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France, and Germany*).

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In *The Fate of Reason, German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, Frederick Beiser asserted that Kant was imbued with the ideals of the Enlightenment: the importance placed on reason, on science, and on thinking for oneself. He wrote of its distrust of authoritarianism and superstition, the importance of freedom and autonomy, and the dignity of the individual². Yet there is a curious irony in Kant's thoughts. In his essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" he sums up many ideas of enlightenment. He notes that the nature of enlightenment lies in overcoming the tutelage of childhood through which we blindly accept the authority of others and instead learning to think for ourselves in our own ways. Further, in the aforementioned essay, as Beiser summed up, Kant views enlightenment as the same as intellectual freedom, a special form of maturity through which one expresses one's own authentic ideas rather than echoes the thoughts of others. Kant writes: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from himself-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. Self-incurred is the tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but rather of resolve and courage to use it without direction from another: Sapere Aude! ["Dare to know," from Horace]. Have courage to use your own mind: thus is the motto of enlightenment."³

Meanwhile, in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant engaged in a critical examination of nature. He saw the limits of reason itself as an inquiry into the extent to which we can solve the problem of knowledge by virtue of the rational resources that are available to us. Here, the following questions can be raised: What is the reach of reason? What are the limits imposed on reason? Kant tried to resolve the problem between empiricism (all that we know comes from experience; the mind is a blank slate) and rationalism (knowledge derived rationally and not by sense data or mathematics). He said that he was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by David Hume, who held the idea (like John Locke) that everything we know is the product of experience. However, Kors and Korshin contended that the skepticism that is inherent in Locke's empiricism makes all knowledge limited and relative to experience makes all knowledge merely probable. This raises the following question: Is probability a sufficient foundation for eternal truth? That is to say,

² For the Romantic, the individual is a matter worthy of great art, hence the existence of autobiographies. What we get out of the Romantic is the notion of the outsider. The outsider comes to be viewed as the paradigm of the Romantic individual. This outsider was construed as someone who connects with the Kantian noumenal world and who does not usually connect with the normal ordinary world. Meanwhile, the insider is viewed as getting assurance and support as well as security from their connections with other people. However, the outsider is without the support and security of the community and society and is thus vulnerable. This vulnerability might make him/her more in touch with reality that reason cannot reach, and it might open him/her up to the kind of creativity that he/she might not otherwise have. This is because reason does not get deep enough into who we really are. In this context, Kant claims that reason cannot reach far enough beyond into the ultimate nature of things, but maybe the vulnerable individual—the outsider, the person who has had this glimpse of the sublime—this experience of the creative can reach into this. Thus, the outsider is a creative person who has access to the transcendent, noumenal sphere of existence. There is also this notion that you could only have inner integrity and truly be an individual if you are truly left alone to be an individual and have the right to not to be interfered with. The Romantics tended to stress the notion of the lonely wanderer, a pilgrim, in the journey of life. It could be that this individual may have a home deep within him in terms of his creative ability or that perhaps he was always been a lonely wanderer. Overall, the Romantics were concerned with the individual's rights. They thought that one should have the right to try to change the way things actually are if they were discriminatory, stale, conventional, or restrictive of creative impulses or powers as well as the right to change the world if it does not speak to the human heart (James Engell. *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* [2013]).

³ Kant. *What is Enlightenment?*

our knowledge is bound by our experience, and the unit of experience is all mental as it is the idea of the world, images and representations of the world. Kors and Korshin went on to explain that Locke made a leap of faith beyond empiricism by assuming that in addition to what we know about the content of our minds and ideas, there is a world out there that is independent of them and not only corresponds to but causes our ideas of the world. So, our knowledge is limited and bound by our experience, and all that we do know is immaterial. Thus, the world as we know it through empirical experience is ideal and not corporeal bodily material. In other words, skepticism does not hold that we do not have images of the world that appear to us as material, but it holds that all we know are images and ideas.

Overall, Kant was reacting to the following: radical empiricism—which holds that nothing can be known with certainty; Locke’s theory that all knowledge comes from the senses; and Hume’s idea that we cannot really know if something is true by observation. More specifically, Hume held the position that the sensory base of knowledge is not reliable and is inadequate.⁴ This can be referred to as Hume’s skepticism, which states that we do not have reliable knowledge. However, Kant saw that a major challenge to the stability of knowledge is the danger of skepticism. In this context, he thought there are ways to find a stable and secure basis for knowledge, and practical reason is possible. Thus, initially, the Kantian project was opposed to skepticism and also against the empiricism of Hume⁵

In his *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*, Roger Scruton noted that Kant agrees with Hume that all knowledge comes from experience because our knowledge arises from experience, our knowledge is grounded on experience. In Kantian terminology, cognitive and epistemic holdings that are not the result of experience are referred to as pure, which means it is nonempirical. In this context, a critique of pure reason means a critical examination of the very forms of rationality that could not possibly be provided by experience, but nonetheless constitutes the framework within which experience becomes possible. Scruton further explained that a priori knowledge does not exist because of experience. Instead, prior to any and every experience, it is there to make experience possible. What we know of the external world factually takes the form of the phenomena, which refers to the objects of perceptions, the world known and the world knowable, the world as processed by sense organs, and the principles of perception. Scruton continued that Kant saw that reason had great success in science, but it has so much confusion and skepticism when it comes to the question of values and ethics. However, Kant was skeptical about the naive faith of the enlightenment that believed that the success of modern science and reason—undertaken by Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and all the other thinkers associated with the enlightenment who transformed our understanding of the physical world and nature prior to Kant—would extend beyond science to the great questions of philosophy itself, so that human reason at some point in time would somehow be able to unlock the secrets of metaphysics as well as physics. In this context, Kant realized that the extension of the success of science and mathematics was not going to be easily made to the rest of the major questions of life, philosophy, and metaphysics. Further, he thought that there was a sharp break between science and the realms of philosophy, metaphysics, morality, and ethics. Therefore, in his *Critique for Pure Reason* (1981), he explained that modern science was successful because it dealt only with the way things appeared to us and not the way things really were in themselves. More

⁴ Strawson, *The Bounds of Senses*

⁵ In short, it was a reaction against rationalism. John Locke held that all of our knowledge came to us through our sense experiences and that things that are not realized by the senses will have no importance as aspects of knowledge. Meanwhile, David Hume was a skeptic philosopher who argued for a regressive materialism that grew out of Locke’s empiricism. Hume viewed that not only did all of our knowledge come to us through the senses but that we should be utterly skeptical of any idea that was set forth as having another source. The mind has priori knowledge and categories as well as time and space. (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*).

specifically, they deal only with the phenomenal world of appearances (P.F. Strawson, "The Bounds of Sense, An Essay of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason").

Moreover, we know of the phenomenal world through what we sense. Here, Strawson noted that the mind is not a blank slate, it has innate and active mechanisms (not knowledge), mechanical processes and structures by which knowledge is generated from raw sense data. The mind uses these data to create an image of the world and what is actually happening in the phenomena, but this is not necessarily happening in quite the manner in which we conceive it. Kant said we will never know things as they are because we have no way of breaking out of this sensory mental mechanism by which we construct an image of the world in order to see the world in and of itself. We cannot know things in and of themselves apart from experience. Thus, he called the world as it appears to us in our experience "the world of appearance," which is an empirically real world according to Kant.

As for the deeper inner essence of things, which refers to things as they really are, Kant said that we cannot know this. However, there has got to be something behind this realm of phenomena, and the question is how accurately does the mental representation of reality that we have reflect the actual reality? Here, Kant made the distinction among the world as it is experienced, the world of experience, the world of phenomena, and what must have been behind the experience, which he calls the "realm of noumena⁶" or the world as is. It is not for us ever to be able to penetrate through the phenomena to the noumenal realm, and so based on this aspect of Kant's philosophy, there is a limit to what we know. Whereas there is the phenomenon, we cannot know the true nature of reality and the world in itself only in the way science grasp it, there is the realm that is shrouded from us, which is beyond our rational capacity. Specifically, science cannot deal with questions concerning things as they really are in themselves. Kant called this realm "the noumena." It is hidden from us, but we cannot know by our reasoning what is hidden from our senses as it escapes them. In this context, Kant thought that our human way of encountering the world is by way of our senses, thus our reason is limited by the limitations of our senses and we are sense bound (Sebastian Gardner, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*).

In short, the world that science has access to is the world of experience that we experience through our senses. As a result, Kant said that our senses give us the world as it appears to us but not as it really is in itself. Therefore, his idea was that the human mind, based on the sense data, constructs an image of the world. Further, knowledge comes to us from the external world via our senses. However, the mind is not a black slate according to Kant, as he referred to the knowledge that is derived from experience as a posteriori. It possesses a priori knowledge that exists before experience. In addition, Kant believed that science structures our experience of the world, and it tells us about the appearances of things. However, it does not give us the reality behind the appearances, which is beyond our senses and inaccessible by our reason. Thus, for Kant, there is a nature of reality that reason cannot access.

Regarding Kant's theory of knowledge, the following questions should be considered: How is knowledge acquired? What is it? What are its possibilities and limits? How does one go about knowing? The issue of truth, according to Kant, is purely rationalist: truth as opposed to probability does not pertain to our propositions about the world. Those can only be probable based on experience. Instead, truth for Kant pertains to the relationship among ideas as well as between any two ideas and among a large number of ideas (Locke calls the clear and distinct idea "the bright sunshine of the mind"). As noted by Rene Descartes, the mind is directed to the consideration of ideas that it sees with the full intuitive certainty of the relationship of ideas as well as similarity and differences that are intuitively true. Moreover, for Descartes, the goal of fundamental natural philosophy is to know truth about the real qualities of the world, which requires the philosopher

⁶ The transcendent or the divine sphere of existence.

to step out of the cave of appearances and look beyond the shadows reflected on the wall, looking at things as they are, is the real substance of the real qualities of the world. For Locke, that kind of knowledge is not available to human beings and is not within the powers of the human mind. Meanwhile, for Locke, the goal of fundamental philosophy is the knowledge of our experience of the world and ideas acquired by experience.⁷

Furthermore, according to Kant, the data presented to the mind by the senses is indeed a valid source of knowledge, but it is not the only one. The mind actually possesses active powers of its own, which it uses to impose order on the data it received. Kant insisted that while minds did not directly apprehend the external world, they are also not passive recipients of sensations. Minds contain certain inbuilt categories, and these are not knowledge per se. Every sensation that comes to the mind is processed and organized by these categories. In this way, knowledge about the external world really does rely on the senses and is not apprehended directly. Nevertheless, the mind is an active partner in the creation of knowledge in ways that have nothing to do with mere reason. The knowledge we derive from the senses is just sensations, and mere reason is, at best, helpless to further penetrate into the essence of things in themselves and that might have caused that sensations. Descriptions of patterns of external reality so far as they are based on sensations were purely phenomenal, and were concerned with mere phenomena; mere data and phenomena tell us nothing about the thing in itself. In this context, Kant said that there is another realm of knowledge available to the mind that does allow us to see into the nature of things in themselves. More specifically, there is a noumenal realm, in which an understanding of the thing in itself (of ethics as well as moral right and wrong) exists (P.F. Strawson, "The Bounds of Sense, An Essay of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason").

Kant and Transcendentalism

Because it was noumenal and not phenomenal, mere reason could not operate there. Reason was designed only to operate on the phenomenal. Thus, reason could never become transcendent. However, just as the mind possesses categories beyond mere reason, it also possesses an understanding that is beyond mere reason, and it was the understanding which opens access to the noumena by intuition. Thus, through the gift of the noumena, the phenomena become transcendental and reason can retire from the stage⁸.

The world of experience is the physical world for Kant, who said that we do not know the essence of things in that we do not know things as they are in themselves. All we know is how we experience them and the way in which they appear in our experiences. In terms of the world of experience, Kant was an empirical realist (the world of appearances and how things appear to us). However, we cannot know things in themselves apart from having experienced them. Thus, Kant called the world in terms of how it appears to us in our experiences as "the world of appearance," which is an empirically real world according to him. As for the deep inner essence of things, things as they really are in themselves, Kant said that we cannot know. Therefore, Kant calls himself a transcendental idealist (Henry E. Allison, Kant's Transcendental Idealism).

Kant in America

The first serious American thinker who was influenced by Kant was James Marsh, who was appointed president of the University of Vermont in October 1826. In 1821, Marsh began studying Kant, and in 1829, he published the American edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. His writing was purely Kantian.

⁷ Strawson, *The Bounds of Senses*

⁸ In *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, Paul Guyer explains that Kant called noumena "the ground of being." The most fundamental forms of existence and the phenomena are the resulting appearances. Kant called all knowledge transcontinental, which is not concerned with the object but with the mode of knowing the object.

Further, his writings and the immigration of Germans to America slowly turned the country's attention in Kantian directions (Kazin, *God, and the American Writer*).

R.D. Richardson noted (in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*) that Emerson was influenced by Marsh's writings and thus became Kantian in his thought, so much so that he took a sabbatical to Europe and met with Samuel Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. The latter understood Kant to mean that the human mind possesses a higher imaginative faculty and that when imagination fuses and connects with reason, it gives the experience of the sublime and of something that we cannot articulate that elevates us, that we do not experience as thoroughly rational, and that we cannot fully comprehend. In some way, that sense of sublimity gives us a sense of transcendence. In short, Kant refers to the notion of their being sublime experiences, getting a glimpse of that which is beyond the experiences that our senses can provide⁹). Upon his return from Europe in 1833, Emerson read an article on Coleridge and Kant by Frederic Hedge, which was published in the *Christian Examiner*. He believed that these spiritual higher truths might be found in and through the physical world. Emerson's version of nature includes human nature, which is also connected to nature that lies outside of us. Specifically, he saw that there is a spiritual force within each individual that is linked to nature.

Thus, Richardson noted that Emerson's ideas emerged out of a range of European classical modes of thought. At the same time, Emerson's Kantian direction of thought led him to believe that "in the world of the phenomenal, there could be no trace of the transcendental." This drove him to conclude that reason is limited to the phenomenal, facts, arguments, logic, and external reality and that the noumenal realm is the spiritual and higher realm of phenomena and of nature, which includes human nature. Emerson saw the noumena as part of nature and as the higher part, the spiritual realm of nature that we should embrace and unify ourselves with. In addition, he thought that while phenomena are processed by reason, the noumena, the spiritual realm, is only accessible and processed by understanding. Thus, for Emerson, understanding (not imagination or reason) is the higher faculty of the mind by which we can conceive of the higher spiritual reality of the world, which is hidden from our senses. In this context, he writes that the higher reality can be accessed by understanding that "reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighed but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary" (Cited in James E. Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2 Vols., Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1888, I,218). As understanding surpasses reason, Emerson stressed the idea of humbling reason to rely on understanding to access the noumenal world; that is, we must humble reason to leave room for faith. Whereas the British Romantics found the way to get a glimpse of the noumena and the sublime in the faculty of imagination, the American Romantics found understanding to be the way through which they can see the higher truth¹⁰ (W.T. Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome: Toward a New Method in Cultural Anthropology and History of Ideas*).

⁹ The Romantics viewed the noumenal realm as accessible by the faculty of imagination.

¹⁰ Through his notion of the sublime, this Kantian noumenal world actually connected with the Romantics. What Romanticism arises out of is the intense desire to experience the unity of personhood to transcend dichotomies both in ourselves and others and to come to some kind of direct contact with reality itself and something that might be masked by the world of ordinary experience and science. Thus, some kind of fusion is sought. Moreover, the Romantics have the underlying idea that we separate ourselves too much in that too much of our experiences has not had the kind of fusion and focus to it. Here, they believe that what we need is to look towards the creative, artistic, and aesthetic. This is taken as the paradigm and as something that we have to attune to the aesthetic that gives us a sense of unity, unification, and belonging. It is part of the romantic idea that we long for a belonging and a place that we find to be home. And for the Romantics (Kantian as they are), the reliance on reason is too austere and does not give us that complete significant sense of being one with ourselves and having a sense that we are at home with ourselves. What the Romantics hope for is a fusing experience that would give us a sense of oneness and a sense of connection with some kind of a whole. They are seeking some kind of experience beyond general belief systems that could somehow make us whole and gives us a sense of fusion with something beyond and a wholeness that could make us feel at home, that the journey of life has brought us to where we

American Romanticism

Influenced by Kant, the Romantics challenged the idea that reason provided the only valid path to truth. Instead, they argued that reason cannot adequately account for the mysteries of life and the noumenal side of the world: beauty, love, human feelings, and spirituality. Thus, like the transcendentalists, the Romantics saw nature as a place where the poets sought spiritual truth.

Later, in 1836, Emerson published *Nature*, which is Kantian in its sensibility. In this work, he embraced nature with both of its realms—the phenomenal and the noumenal. He also proposed the complete complementarity of humanity and nature:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right (8).

Thus, nature offered men beauty, which is a formation of taste without any mixture of corporeal benefits. Emerson, the founder of the transcendentalism movement in the United States, later wrote a pamphlet entitled “The Transcendentalist,” in which he summarized the movement as follows:

“from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant. . . who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day Transcendental¹¹.”

It is clear that Emerson adopted the binary image of the world of the phenomena and noumena from Kant. That is to say, these two parts of the world are part of each other. To illustrate, our knowledge of the physical world is bound by our sensory experience, which is referred to as the phenomena. But these phenomena are a manifestation and an extension of their real essence, which is the noumena. In other words, the phenomenon (the material world) is the extension of its noumenal essence. Therefore, understanding has primacy over reason, and the world is clearer if the light of reason is diminished.

In *The American Scholar*, Emerson said the following: “Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.” That is to say, we should not spend our time copying the models of the past. One must look at the books of nature and not only at the books of man to see through nature to nature’s author. According to Emerson, this spiritual truth can be found in and through nature and the physical world. This is for Emerson egalitarian, which means that each individual has the capacity to experience this truth.

truly belong and that our longing for belonging is now complete. (W.T. Jones, *The Romantic Syndrome: Toward a New Method in Cultural Anthropology and History of Ideas*).

¹¹ From this, the Kantian root of American transcendentalism transpired.

In *American Transcendentalism, 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry*, Boller observed that Kant's philosophical system became central to transcendentalism as the apparent means of reconciliation between materialism—the belief that all of our knowledge derived from the senses and that matter is the only form of existence in the universe—and idealism, which is the view that there is another realm of existence that we might call the “realm of ideas” (Descartes and Plato)—the realm of pure spirit that accounts for an important aspect of what we can know. In a similar way, Coleridge talked of “the one life within us and abroad” (122)¹². Here, he meant that the spiritual realm can be found beneath the vagary of passing sense experiences. Moreover, the problem is partly viewed in terms of what is permanent. This idea can be traced back to Plato who said that the material world is composed of mere appearances, while reality is the realm of pure and permanent ideas—vis-à-vis the parable of the cave. What we see in the cave is the shadow of reality, while reality exists beyond us. Plato then argued that the purpose of philosophy is to take us out of that dark cave of shadowy appearances into the realm of pure light, where we see things as they actually are. Therefore, in transcendentalism, the idea of spiritual reality transcends our sensory experience beyond empirical and logical reasoning. In this context, Emerson, on other occasions, described the idea that the spiritual realm resides in the phenomena as immanence. The phenomenon could reveal the energy that lies within it, and hence in Thoreau's *Walden*, it is what lies beyond the material world and somehow can be revealed through it.

In Emerson's work, the idea that nature is an extension of the noumena is put forward. In this context, he wrote “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts” (17) in *Nature*. Thus, he saw nature as but a visible extension of the spiritual realm. It is the pure light when it crystallizes, “thickens”, it then becomes the phenomena that we can see using our five senses, “this world that we live in is but thickened light” (*The Scholar* 1883). The idea of the spiritual nominal realm crystallized to form the phenomena¹³.

This is the same idea that transpired in Wordsworth's idea that we might all be able to “see into the life of things” (“Ode on Immortality” *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey: The Two-part Prelude* (35)). Specifically, we can see beyond our sense perception into the life of things, but only if we look with what Wordsworth referred to as the “inward, spiritual eye” (6). Moreover, Emerson referred to this idea as the “eyeball”. In his book-length essay, *Nature*, Emerson wrote “I became a transparent eyeball . . . I can see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.” His concept of the “transparent eyeball” refers to a clarity of vision, devoid of all confusions. Therefore, Emerson also said, “so shall we come to look at the world with new eyes.” This idea of new eyes is very important to Emerson and could refer to the mind's eye, understanding, and seeing the world as it really is. These new eyes reveal to us a whole new world, the spiritual world above the phenomena¹⁴.

Emerson saw nature at the level of individual character before it puts on its persona, its mask, and its own construct. In an essay entitled “Self-Reliance,” he wrote “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.” This silence could be the noumenal side of things, and the preaching is getting into the act, into culture, into phenomena, and into the stage. In this context, the Canadian writer Robertson Davies explains that perhaps the way to see into the reality of things is to see with one's mind's eye. He said that when he was a child, he was told by adults to “keep his eyes peeled.” In referring to this expression, Davies understood that it meant seeing the clown (the character) before he enters the stage, the character before the character begins the act. Therefore, when the character starts acting, you know why that character acted the way it did (Spadoni and Grant, *A bibliography of Robertson Davies*, 73).

¹² Peter Cheyne. *Coleridge's Contemplative Philosophy* (2020)

¹³ This idea was so abstract to people at the time. Charles Dickens noted that “whatever was unintelligible would certainly be transcendental,” and Edgar Allan Poe told a young writer that “it is very easy to write like a transcendentalist, just use small words and turn them upside down” (qtd in John Calvin Metcalf *American Literature* [1914] p. 151).

¹⁴ One of the Concord transcendentalists, Theodore Parker, had a sermon entitled “The Transient and Permanent,” referring to this same idea of the binary of higher and lower reality, where the phenomena is the transient and the spiritual, which is the noumenal, is the permanent.

Conclusion

To conclude, Emerson wrote in his essay “The Transcendentalist”:

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism . . . 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.

Thus, Emerson associated materialism as being the phenomena and idealism as the noumena. In “The Transcendentalist”, he also said

“Every materialist can be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist.” That is to say, one cannot unsee what one has seen. He also went on to say the following: “The idealist, in speaking of events, sees them as spirits. He does not deny the sensuous fact: by no means; but he will not see that alone. He does not deny the presence of this table, this chair, and the walls of this room, but he looks at these things as the reverse side of the tapestry, as the other end, each being a sequel or completion of a spiritual fact which nearly concerns him.”¹⁵

Emerson emphasized that the world needs to be understood in spiritual terms rather than through any kind of reductive materialism. In this context, he wrote an essay titled “The Oversoul,” referring in a sense to the spiritual realm, the soul of the world. In this essay, he said “in the ordinary, in the common, in the low I find significance.” Therefore, based on that revelation and a new understanding of reality in and of itself and based on one’s new experiences, Emerson went on to say, “build therefore your own world.” This is, in a sense, a call for action. Thereafter, the transcendentalists followed their higher, noumenal, principles to defy unjust laws and were willing to suffer consequences in the process of, for example, abolishing slavery (the case of Henry David Thoreau and John Brown). To that effect, the message of change rings out in Emerson’s words (Self-Reliance, P. 11) “who so would be a man would be a nonconformist” and resonates all through the twentieth century in a way that sums up the American experience.

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¹⁵ Emerson, the prophet of transcendentalism in America, and the founder of the transcendentalist movement and the transcendental club, summarized the origin of transcendentalism as such: “It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Konigsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man’s thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to that extent, that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought, is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*” (“The Transcendentalist”).

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