HENRY DAVID THOREAU - A TRANSCENDENTALIST IN AN EMERSONIAN SENSE

Lucian Radu
Assoc. Prof., PhD, „Transilvania" University of Braşov

Abstract: This paper is meant to investigate how Henry David Thoreau could accomplish the major criteria specific to the transcendentalist school of thought as they were embodied in Ralph Waldo Emerson`s work and literary theory: the tendency to pass beyond human experience, mystic approach towards nature as a part of divinity , strong belief in inspiration and extasy, repudiation of the past, avoidance of imitation and repetition, individualism, propensity towards philosophy, morality, and the poetic communion with nature.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, communion with nature, inspiration, extasy, repudiation of the past

Introduction - Transcendental philosophy

The literature of New England was deeply modified by transcendental philosophy. Ralph Waldo Emerson was the most outstanding representative of this school of thought. The English philosopher, Locke, had considered that intellectual process was limited to our senses. For Emanuel Kant, the soul has ideas which are not connected to any of our senses: "*Everyone has an idea of time and space although no one has ever felt, tasted, seen, eaten, or smelled time or space"* (cited in Halleck,185*).* He called that idea a transcendental form. There are two categories of facts challenging all human beings. There are ordinary phenomena, which address directly to the senses, and which are perceived by most people. Apart from them, there are forces which the senses cannot perceive. Our eyes can see the living forms surrounding us but cannot grasp the meaning of life*." It is something more than the bodily hand that gropes in the darkness and touches God's hand (*Halleck, 186). To communicate with a Divine Power, we must transcend the experience of the senses, to understand the meaning of what David Thoreau intends to transmit when he says:

"I hear beyond the range of sound,
I see beyond the range of sight."(Thoreau ,235).

The transcendentalists` desire is to pass beyond the human senses and experience. Apart from the usual meaning, a few characteristics could be associated with this school of thought:

1. A strong belief in inspiration and extasy, considering nature a part of divinity
2. Repudiation of the past, avoiding imitation and repetition
3. Plain living and high thinking in isolation and solitude
4. Morality -the basis for a happy life
5. Propensity towards Philosophy
6. Individualism and poetic communication with nature. (Halleck,188)

How these characteristics could be applied to David Thoreau and his work, following the Emersonian model, will be the preoccupation of the next sections of this paper

1. A strong belief in inspiration and extasy, considering nature a part of divinity

From Plato and German philosophy, Emerson borrowed the idea of cosmological dualism. He considered the universe is composed of Nature and the soul. Nature and art, all

other men and human body fall under the category of Nature. Nature is perceived in contrast to the soul. The dichotomy, nature and the soul, refers firstly to the human mind. There are three relationships, nature/the soul (Emerson will replace the soul by Over Soul), man / the soul, man / nature. Over-Soul is perceived as the unifying principle of the universe (Dumitriu,181). The relationship man/nature offers a meaning of the universe to human being. Nature is assumed to be the projection of the Over-Soul in the unconscious, and man is its projection in the conscious According to Emerson, nature is the most important object worthy of man`s contemplation. (Dumitriu, 182)

This is in contradiction with the old Puritan view, according to which nature seemed to bear the mark of the original sin and the primal curse.

As could be observed, for the transcendentalist, nature was a part of Over-Soul (Divinity). Any age that accomplishes great things should be deeply enthusiastic.

According to Emerson, one of the characteristics of transcendental thought was the belief "in inspiration and ecstasy." (Emerson,112). The feeling of ecstasy, due to the fact that he was a part of Divine Power, made Emerson exclaim:

> "*I see the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from daybreak to sunrise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations; the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind*." (Emerson,115)

If nature can exist outside of God or it was not God's thoughts is a pertinent question. Most of the writers did not share this idealistic conception of nature, but they manifest a belief in "*the soul's mystic companionship with the bird, the flower, the cloud, the ocean, and the stars."* (Halleck, 189).

Emerson says:

> "*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*."(Emerson, 217)

Thoreau often enters Nature's mystic atmosphere and develops a feeling of companionship with her. Of the song of the wood thrush, he says:

> "*Whenever a man hears it, he is young, and Nature is in her spring. Whenever he hears it, it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of heaven are not shut against him.... It changes all hours to an eternal morning. It banishes all trivialness. It reinstates me in my dominion, makes me the lord of creation, is chief musician of my court. This minstrel sings in a time, a heroic age, with which no event in the village can be contemporary*." (Thoreau, 194)

The transcendentalist, while expressing his ecstasy over life, has emphasized that he does not wish to do anything twice. In this way they avoid repetition, imitation, consequently repudiating the past.

2. Repudiation of the past, avoiding imitation and repetition,

For Emerson God has enough new experiences, so that repetition should be avoided. He rejects routine. "*Everything*," Emerson says, *"admonishes us how needlessly long life is*." (Emerson 212).

At the beginning of "Nature", "The philosophy of insight" exposed by Emerson was entirely focused on repudiation of the past. "*Man was called, to see the world afresh as for the first time, and nothing was allowed to interpose between it and man`s eye."* (Emerson, 215). The act of seeing could be performed only in the present.

The reason why Thoreau left Walden shows one of his pronounced transcendental characteristics, avoidance of repetition. After presenting his first year of life there, and adding, "the second year was similar to it." he says:

> "*I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one* . " (Thoreau,110).

He does not ask other human beings to imitate him in studying nature. He says, "*Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour."(Thoreau,111)*

3. Plain living and high thinking in isolation and solitude

Thoreau offered great importance to plain living and high thinking.

Like in the case of other transcendentalists, Thoreau`s desire was to enrich his life with a "wide margin of leisure" to live in his higher capacities and to avoid being suppressed by the drudgery of earning his existence (Halleck,208). He was determined to eliminate any complications of civilization and to live a simple life. The leisure thus assured, he dedicated his time to study birds, plants, trees, fish, nature, in general, and to write his books derived from these experiences. He used to walk every day in the woods and lived alone in the forest for two years and two months, in a small house built by himself on Emerson's property beside Walden Pond, about a mile far from Concord. The record of his life at Walden forms the basis for his best-known work. Walden, New England's Utopia, is the record of Thoreau's ideal life in the forest. When he left the forest, he explained the reason for his decision:

> "*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear*."(Thoreau, 187)

4. Propensity towards Philosophy

Self -Reliance supports the idea that man is the ultimate goal of Emerson`s philosophy.

Vision or the inner seeing *"is not like the vision of the eye but is union with things known*. Imagination is defined as "*the use which Reason makes of the material world*" (Emerson, 101).

Emerson is indebted to Plato regarding *„the primacy* of *the spirit over nature"*, but he also emphasized on "*taking nature as the foothold of truth.*" (Dumitriu,157). Nature as the object of contemplation was very rewarding because it appeared to the human eye "*both as sensible phenomena and projections of the universal mind." (Dumitriu, 162)*

Thoreau is also a philosopher, who manifests the influence of the transcendental school, more precisely of Emerson. Some of Thoreau's philosophy is *"impractical and too unsocial",* but it discovers a foundation of enchantment (Halleck,184). He thus summarizes the philosophy that he learned from his life at Walden:

> "*I learned this at least by my experiment--that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.... If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.*" (Thoreau, 282)

5. Morality -A Basis for a Happy Life

Self-reliance could be interpreted as an ethical doctrine. Emerson felt the socio-economic forces at work in America. These forces adopted Self-reliance as their moral guide,

using it to fight against "*aggressiveness and rapaciousness in social behavior"*. Briefly Self-reliance "*supplied the tycoon or the financial magnate with an ethic" (Dumitriu,168).*

Self-reliance is full of moral consistency. Higher self is that part of the self in which the Over-Soul abode; it is responsible to inform man's moral behavior with the Platonic virtues of Justice, Goodness, and Beauty.

Thoreau insisted that the most important ingredient for a happy life is a consistent moral basis - a common characteristic of the great authors of New England, but he had his own personal way of sharing this truth.

He thought life too earnest to tolerate the frivolous or the dilettante, and he issued his famous warning that no one could *"kill time without injuring eternity."* (Thoreau, 284)

Thoreau aimed at studying nature for the" *revelation of nature's joyous moral message to the spiritual life of man."* (Halleck,192*).* He cannot distinguish between the song of the wood thrush and the hermit thrush. To him the most important fact was that the thrush is a rare poet, singing of "*the immortal wealth and vigor that is in the forest*." "*The thrush sings*," says Thoreau, "*to make men take higher and truer views of things*." (Thoreau, 290).

6. Individualism and Poetic Communion with Nature

Emerson's Self-Reliance could be interpreted as an exaltation of the individual.

He started with the supposition that intuition was the way to truth. He considers that the individual mind is totally responsible for establishing the original relation to the universe. The individual is the focus of his interest. Emerson`s self-reliance appears as "a *vindication of individualism*." (Dumitriu, 172). He equally affirmed the boundless possibilities of man. "*He who has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite"* (Emerson, I08).

Walden is evidence of "*Thoreau's aggressive individualism"* (Halleck, 189). Intimate companionship with nature disclosed a secret to him that the joy of life was increased by "*sympathetic observation of everyday occurrences"*, a secret shared with his readers (Halleck, 189).

His *aggressive individualism* is accompanied by" *his poetic apprehension of wild nature".* (Halleck, 190).

Walden develops a love for common natural objects, and reveals a joyful world exactly like a great poet.

For Emerson, the poet is a superior being due to the *wholeness of vision*, and the inspiration by which he can express his vision precisely. *"By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer or language-maker"* (Emerson, 237). *The poet has the largest power to receive and to impart"* (Emerson, 228).

Imagination, the highest poetic faculty, is defined as "*the use which Reason makes of the material world*" (Emerson 101).

The poet is a creator of meaning which emerges as the result, of the fusion between nature and mind. Nature appears to him a "*vehicle of thought because it teaches man the use of words as signs of natural facts*." (Emerson, 85)

Thoreau could be seen as a poet-naturalist. He saw nature with the eyes of a poet. His ear was impressed with the song of the whippoorwill, the lisping of the chickadees and the call of the toads. (Halleck, 192). For him the bluebird "*carries the sky on its back*." (Thoreau,291). The linnets come to him "*bearing summer in their natures*." (Thoreau,292).

His style is almost poetic. He says, "*The one great rule of composition and if I were a professor of rhetoric, I should insist on this is to speak the truth*."(Thoreau,295).

Lowell's characterization of Thoreau's style has hardly been surpassed. "*His range was narrow, but to be a master is to be a master. There are sentences of his as perfect as anything in the language, and thoughts as clearly crystallized; his metaphors and images are always fresh from the soil."(Lowell,128)*

Conclusion

In conclusion, the major characteristics of Thoreau`s work : the specific transcendental tendency to pass beyond human experience, his mystic approach towards nature, considering it a part of divinity, his strong belief in inspiration and extasy, repudiation of the past, avoidance of imitation and repetition, aggressive individualism, propensity towards philosophy, his creed in morality as a basis for a happy life, and the poetic communion with nature make him one of the most remarkable and outstanding representative of the transcendentalist school of thought in an Emersonian sense.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Dumitriu, Geta (1985), *American Literature – the nineteenth century*, Editura Universității București.
2. Emerson, Ralph Waldo (2000): *The Essential Writings*, Modern Library Classics
3. Halleck, Reuben Post (2016) *History of American Literature*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
4. Lowell, James Russell (2018) *The Complete Writings*, Hard Press
5. Thoreau, Henry David (2013) *Complete Works*, Delphi Clasics